

Being kept as a pet by the Zephenidians is no walk in the park.

A race of wolf-like aliens finds humans a tasty delicacy. A human captured in a raid must brave life on the alien's home planet as a kind of pet. Abused and malnourished for the past two years, he may not have much time left.

Warning, extreme violence, non-graphic sexual themes.

The story now has the ending I wanted to write for some time.

Despite its themes, this is not a fetish story. This is a piece of serious science fiction and should be approached as such.

Wolf Pet

By

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The wails of alarms assailed my ears and the crimson beams of emergency lights swept through the smoky gloom of the corridors. The sharp acrid scent of ozone, scorched metal, and fried electrical components, stung my nostrils. I pushed back against the wall, as I raised a small blaster pistol, and gripped it tightly in both hands. The weapon was short and squat, its body was

a bit larger than a fist, with an inclined stock which was slightly longer than its barrel. The trigger was more of a movable pad on the leading edge of the stock, with a long wide trigger guard. On the butt of the weapon was a few inactive indicator lights, and a slider for setting the weapon's power level. The corridor seemed to be deserted, though I continued to grip the weapon tightly as I slowly moved it from side to side, watching and waiting.

I hoped that the end would be quick and neat, but knew that quick neat deaths were not what the Zephenidians had in mind. They were here to kill, loot, and feast, with Human meat being on the menu. Making matters worse, Zephenidians preferred to capture their victims alive, so they could make the kills more personal, often while their victims were restrained, strung up, or otherwise being brutalized. They felt that this made their meat taste better. Being hung upside-down and butchered alive like some animal was not a fate I was going to allow. I had to kill as many Zephenidians as I could, to make myself as much of a threat as possible, so they'd either flee, or kill me outright. I was not about to let myself be captured.

Lancing from the gloom, a beam of blue-hot blinding death flashed past me. The beam sparked against a nearby bulkhead with a loud sizzling pop, leaving a long, curved, white-hot gash melted into the metal. I spun around and aimed my blaster blindly towards the source of the incoming fire as my heart pounded in my ears, and as my vision slowly began to clear. The spreading viscous warmth around my loins and the foul stink, alerted me to the small cesspool which had formed in my underpants. I waited for death to come, though I intended to fight on, hoping that I would kill as many of them as I could. It was simple survival instinct, and I hoped it would serve me. I slowly edged towards a blue door marked "Maintenance." As I reached for the door, it slid aside, revealing a dark utility closet. Several crates were stacked in the corner, along with a large, flat, flying saucer shaped automated floor buffer. I slowly backed inside the closet, but remained in the doorway to block the door, as I held my weapon at the ready.

From my right darted a large bipedal wolf-like creature. I instinctively placed the barrel of the blaster to its head. As the creature began to wheel around, I squeezed the trigger. There was a sickening sizzling *krr-thunk* as the light dazzled me. I fired several more times into the flesh at point-blank range. As my vision cleared, I glanced down at the slightly twitching form at my feet. From its shoulders down, it resembled a tailless bipedal dog or wolf, with short thick fur covering its body, but it lacked a tail. Its head was a smoking ruin, with an occasional flame

still flickering on the seared fur and flesh. Its eyes were an even more ghastly sight, as they were glazed and half-cooked. The smoke which wafted around me smelled like a barbecue gone horribly wrong, making me gasp and choke.

The ship was taken, and those who were still alive were making their last stands, assuming that I wasn't the last one remaining. Hiding would be difficult due to the use of portable and ship-based scanners. Hiding under hyperdrives, fusion reactors, power distributors, and other high-powered systems would interfere with said scanners. However, these systems were dangerous, especially when damaged, and were mainly on the engineering deck, which was several decks below me. Trying to fight my way there would be a major undertaking.

The escape pods were another possibility, and if they had borderjumpers, they could potentially provide escape, even if it meant a slow death as supplies on the pod ran out. *Ah, venting the atmosphere of the escape pod would be a quick solution to that problem*, I thought. I turned and pushed forward while gripping my blaster with both hands to hold it steady. The alarms continued to scream while the shadows moved menacingly as the amber and red emergency lights spun.

A lupine figure loomed from the shadows at the intersection ahead, and I raised my blaster. As the creature began to turn, I could see its wolfish muzzle, with its ears drawn back, and its teeth bared. I squeezed the trigger, loosing a torrent of blue-hot plasma bolts. The creature dove to the side as one of my blasts singed some fur on its side, sending a spray of sparks in all directions. A tiny red light began to blink rapidly on the back of the weapon, indicating imminent power cell depletion. Without any spare cells, a few more shots was all I had. I glanced around nervously hoping that this creature didn't have company.

The shape darted back into the intersection and it fired a lance of blue-hot plasma, which dazzled my eyes. The blast tore into the wall next to me, showering me with sparks, which stung my shoulders. I answered with another volley of pulses, one of which exploded against the creature's leg, sending the alien flailing to the floor. The wounded creature quickly dragged its body into the right adjoining corridor as the wound on its leg smoldered. I gripped my nearly depleted weapon tightly in my hand, as I hurried to the intersection to finish the job. The creature's weapon and power cells would likely give me a fighting chance, albeit a small one.

As I rounded the corner, I saw that the corridor ahead was dark, lit only by the

intermittent sparking of an open wall-panel. My heart continued to pound as I wheeled around, trying to make sure I was alone with my target. A shadowy figure was slumped against the wall, and as I approached it, I could see that it was a Zephenidian who was spraying medication over an area of charred flesh on its leg. As I leveled the weapon to finish the creature off, I felt a sudden presence behind me. I spun around to confront the new threat. There was a bright flash accompanied by a loud snap as pain surged through every inch of my body. The pain gave way to the sensations of billions of insects crawling over me as every muscle in my body become limp. As I collapsed, my body was numb and my mind was swimming in murky quicksand. Fighting to stay conscious, I looked up to see that it was another wolf-alien, who had caught me unaware with a stunner. I screamed inside my head as I faded into unconsciousness.

* * * *

The scream of horror shattered the silence, and the scream was my own. I had awakened from this nightmare wishing that it was merely a dream. Unfortunately, those events had already happened, and this horror was far from over. I cried "*Will this nightmare ever end!*" as I lay on the cold, hard, stained concrete floor. The room was dark, save for a square of rust-tinged moonlight, which streamed from a small single window on the concrete wall. Misery and fear were my only companions, for the room was cold, dank, and it stank, and there was no telling how long it would be before my captor tired of me and ended my life.

I huddled in a corner, naked, save for a leathery rawhide blanket from some huge deceased animal, which reeked of me, this room, and of death. The blanket was barely adequate, as cold damp air leaked through it to chill my flesh. My back itched from the mass of tangled and matted hair which grew down to my lower back, and had become host to a multitude of fleas and lice. The freezing floor was soiled with my own wastes, some putrefied, decomposing maggot ridden meat, and some old vomit-like crud which had seemingly fossilized in place. It was more of an animal pen than a room, and to my captor, that was all I was, just an animal. A cramp gnawed at my insides making me painfully aware that I had not been feeling very well for the past several months, or what I thought was several months. This place was timeless, like a prison, where you might see day and night, but unless you marked each day, you lost track of the time you actually spent here. As far as I knew, based on what I assumed to be seasonal changes.

I've spent at least two years on this freezing hellhole of a planet, mostly sequestered in

this cold filthy room. Hope, or rather the fantasy of rescue had been the only thing which kept me going. Even if my captor, who claimed me as some kind of pet, or livestock, didn't kill me, I probably wouldn't last much longer. My health had been slowly failing over the past several months due to exposure, bad food, stress, and internal parasites. A few months, maybe a year, was all I had left under these conditions, provided my captor didn't eat me first, which I'd almost rather he had done, to spare me from the ugly protracted death which lie ahead of me. I've never been religious, and having been captured didn't really change this all that much. I did pray to random gods and deities, such as Allah, Jesus, God, Buddha, Vishnu, and even Zeus, until I gave up after a few months.

I had experienced nearly everything that a poorly treated pet might, from physical abuse inflicted on me by my captor, to neglect, to having to live in my own filth, to infestation by fleas and lice. There were even a few incidents of my having to sexually gratify one of my captor's friends. Though this was not something I wanted to do, it did help improve the conditions of my captivity for a short time, afterwards. My treatment had varied from downright abuse, especially during the first year, to mostly neglect in recent months. There was a sense, a feeling, that my captor might know that I was dying, or at least not thriving here, though this could merely have been wishful thinking on my part. I lowered my gaze to a yellow-green spatter of fluid on the floor, with what appeared to be grains of rice slowly crawling in it. The sight made me feel sicker than I already was.

From beyond the door, came a faint clicking, like large clawed feet on a hard wood floor. It grew louder, then stopped. A lock snapped, and the door slowly creaked open. The light on the other side was subdued, but I could still make out the tall foreboding silhouette of a large bipedal shape which was over a head taller than me. Its head was a lupine muzzle, large ears pricked forward, and a glint of orange iris was visible in its eyes. Under and along its arms, the fur hung long, almost draping over its muscular form like a cloak. The hands were large, furred, and the digits terminated in short strong claws. The wolf-alien wore nothing, and its penile sheath revealed that the creature was male. In its left hand, it held a harness, and a length of chain. He barked something that sounded like "*Vashkuuff*," and as he spoke, I could see the glimmer of its large canine teeth, and the small incisors, befitting its wolf heritage.

I recognized the word, "*Vashkuuff*," as this creature's name for me. In response, I

mumbled, "My name is Don Mcferron you stupid mutt!" while glaring at my captor as I struggled to my feet. This had become a daily ritual for as long as I've been in this creature's captivity. Sometimes I would shout at him, but with how routine this had become, today, my effort was more half-hearted than usual. I tensed my body as I watched the creature, readying myself for any possible attack, and just now realizing how much like a caged wild animal I had become. I slowly lowered my arms and stepped backwards towards the window while eying my captor, owner, or whatever the hell he was to me.

He would enter the room, usually to dump food on the floor, or fill a large stone water bowl, or rarely, to clean my enclosure using a high pressure hose. Rarer still, would he take me outdoors, though with the near constant snowfall most of the year, this wasn't something I looked forward to most of the time. Physical interaction was very rare and limited to abuse, or restraint, or some combination of the two. At times I felt like rushing him, to force him to kill me, though so far, I've never gained the nerve to do so.

Seeing that my captor had the leash and harness, I knew that he was going to take me outside. Though I didn't look forward to the cold and the snow, it would be time spent outside this squalid room. It would be a possible chance to escape, however briefly. It would also be a chance for me to get myself killed and thus end my suffering. I cautiously approached the wolf-alien, and dropped my blanket. Lowering myself to my knees in a show of submission, I slowly tilted my head back to expose my throat. He lowered the harness over my head while pulling the tangled mass of hair from under it, then clipped the buckle around my chest. The thought of wrapping my fingers around his neck and attempting to throttle him crossed my mind, but I knew this creature could easily overpower me, even when I was healthy. Once the harness was secured, I slowly got to my feet, picked up the blanket, and pulled it back around myself. I was lead through the door of my room, into a den, with many seating pads surrounding a low table. Overhead, was a high domed ceiling with a circle of small lights just below the apex. In the brighter light of the dwelling, I could see that my captor's fur was dense and thick, mostly gray, with a mottling of charcoal-gray around the eyes and jowls. Light gray-brown mottling ran along his spine, where it radiated out in faint stripes which appeared to trace his ribs. The creature had no tail, nor evidence that he ever had one. There was a thought in the back of my mind, that in another time, place, and situation, this creature could have been a friend, possibly

even a cuddly affectionate friend, like a fully intelligent, sentient dog. Unfortunately the universe, and history, had conspired to turn these creatures into bloodthirsty hunters, with humanity on the opposite side of the predator-prey relationship.

As the wolf lead me towards the door, he handed me a fist-sized chunk of dried meat. I took a bite out of the flesh, which tasted a bit like flavorless jerky which had been dusted with powdered bile. I knew that the powder was likely a vitamin supplement, and was probably the reason I've not died from scurvy. My insides protested but I forced myself to take another bite as my owner opened the door which lead outside. A gust of freezing wind blasted from the doorway, sending clouds of frost into the relatively warm indoor air. The chill seeped through my blanket making me shiver. The Zephenidian pulled me outside into the ice cold chill, then he closed the door behind him.

I cringed as my bare feet crunched through the burning-cold, ice encrusted snow. For the two or three years that I had been here, there had usually been snow on the ground. I only remembered two seasons here, winter and Antarctic doom. During winter it would be very cold, though the weather was generally calm, with occasional light snowfall. During Antarctic doom, blinding blizzards would sweep through the area, and even this creature would avoid going outside except to work, or whatever he did during the day. It was winter now, and the temperature had begun to drop for the last several weeks. I looked up towards the starry sky. A tiny bright orange pinprick of a sun, cast the world in a rusty glow. There were two moons low on the horizon, one full and the other gibbous, which gave the place a sort of "winter wonderland" appearance. Both moons were lit white by the planet's primary sun which had yet to rise with the coming dawn. The vegetation was sparse and consisted of mostly scraggly shrubs and stunted conifer-like trees, with tufts of tall brown grass scattered across the snowy plain. Looking back, I saw that my captor's home was a white flat-topped dome like structure, similar to an igloo, but made from a substance resembling poured concrete. It was adorned with small square windows, along with a more boxy addition adjoining the structure. His home was one of several, which formed a semi-circle around a central courtyard. From the courtyard, ran a black snow-free footpath, which felt slightly warm to my feet, which was a relief from the snow. I walked in silence, since me and my captor lacked a common language, and it was illegal for Zephenidians to use translator equipment around Humans. The thought of ripping the chain from

my captor's hand and trying to run for it, crossed my mind, but there would be nowhere to go. He'd probably re-capture me with ease, or I'd die of exposure. There would be fields of snow and tundra, along with other Zephenidians who would probably either return me to my captor, or just eat me. Ahead, loomed a large white sprawling building, and as we neared it, a large well-lit doorway came into view. Through the door, was a stairway consisting of wide shallow steps, which lead downward into a well lit tunnel. The air was thankfully warmer, and the stairs were dry, so my shivering began to subside somewhat. The stairs descended to a platform, which was flanked by a clear glass tube two and a half meters thick, with a sliding glass door in the middle, with a free-standing control console next to it. The landing appeared deserted, and there was no tubecars currently present inside the tube. Tubecars were familiar to me even back home on Earth, where they allowed rapid travel across continents, and among others forms of travel, have pretty much replaced airliners. I took another bite of the dry meat as I was lead towards the door of the tube.

My captor approached the small panel mounted on top of the free-standing pedestal, where he pressed a large call-button. I felt the chill in my legs begin to ebb as the dry concrete floor warmed my cold wet feet. Back at home, I was probably considered long dead, since few who get captured by these creatures ever escape.

* * * *

My life, where did it go wrong? I've always had a fascination with galactic history and extraterrestrial life. As a child, I was fascinated about what little was known about the Denitrians. They built an empire spanning galaxies about 3-4 billion years ago, and many species owe their existence to their activities. Though the Denitrians disappeared a few thousand years ago, I was convinced that they still existed, somewhere. However, traditional history classes bored me. When I entered college, I majored in, and ultimately got my bachelor's degree in xenozoology with an emphasis on uplifted species, and had begun my post graduate studies. My ultimate wish was to join the crew of a long duration mission well beyond the Federation's borders, so I could fulfill my dreams. I had traveled from earth to Ak'taeus III to attend Ak'tae University. I had earned my degree and was heading to Torresia II to do some field studies on Torresian Manglers, fearsome predators with a peculiar biochemistry involving silicon-carbon

composites. Deciding against the expense of booking a traditional passenger liner, I went with a freighter called *Elysium's Pride*. I was assured that the crew were competent, and that the ship was well armed and well protected. En route, a vessel had intercepted the *Pride*, and used its hyperdrive's wake to force the ship into normal space. Once in normal space, they proceeded to attack. My guess, was, that we hadn't raised our shields in time, and the blast took out the entire bridge. Zephenidians transported aboard, and began to slaughter everyone. I had been captured alive, and taken aboard the Zephenidian's vessel. There, I had to watch as Humans were tortured and mutilated in various gruesome ways. Apparently this their idea of fun. I had seen a man being disemboweled with a long hook-like blade. Several others had their eyeballs pulled out with metal hooks. One man managed to escape but was quickly cornered against a bulkhead, and what happened to him was the stuff of nightmares. Three Zephenidians surrounded him, and taunted him for a while, even took turns biting him. When they got bored with this game, which left the man in a crying bloody heap, two of the Zephenidians grabbed each of his arms in their teeth and began a sick game of tug-a-war, as the man shrieked in agony as he was torn apart. The Zephenidians had never attempted to communicate. Those Humans who had tried to communicate with the Zephenidians using Mindlink translators were killed on sight. I have no idea why I was spared this brutality, and given, or sold, to my current Zephenidian owner as part of a bizarre captive breeding program. I wasn't tall, nor overly fit. Sure, I had put up a good fight, and managed to have killed two Zephs before my capture. Once I was with my current owner, I tried anything I could to attempt to prove my sentience, which at best, was ignored, or at worst, resulted in me getting physically attacked by him. Once, I had drawn crude pictures on the walls of my room with my own waste. I still bear a rather nasty scar on my right arm that my owner had inflicted with his teeth.

I had known much about Zephenidian society before my capture. The *Establishment of Prukak* was a fascist organization of Zephenidian elite, and they had ruled Zephenidian society with an Iron claw. Many members of the *Establishment* had developed a taste for Human meat, and had decreed that Humans were non-sentient animals, to be exploited as a delicacy. Use of Mindlink translators around Humans was claimed by the Establishment to cause brain damage to Zephenidians, and Zephenidians which have had such contact were required to be euthanized. Human cities and dwellings were explained away as having been built by the Chakharans, or

Lutrians as they're often called, and Humans on space vessels were seen as merely watchdogs to discourage intruders on otherwise automated vehicles. Zephenidian culture had developed with a strong sense of duty and hierarchy, and because of this, the decisions of leaders were rarely questioned. When Zephenidian leaders were questioned, Zephenidians died, usually horribly. Much of this grew out of resentment the Zephenidians began to harbor towards the Chakharans when they tried to manipulate Zephenidian culture. Humans likely became their target since at that time, Earth was under Chakharan protection.

My train of thought snapped back to the situation at hand. It was rare for my captor to take me outside, and rarer still that he'd take me into the tubecar system. This generally meant one thing. He was taking me to be bred. Captive breeding did have its perks. There was the sex, though at times, I wondered why I was even participating in their sick games. There was also the interaction with other Humans which I had begun to crave after so long on this planet. Then there was the hope of getting any kind of news from back home, as well as the possibility, of attempting an escape. Four times previously, I was taken out to an enclosure or room with one or more Human females for me to have sex with, and possibly impregnate. The first two women I had mated with on this planet, were mute and mentally gone. They both had scars on their temples suggesting that they may have had lobotomies, or similar surgery done to them to turn them into vegetables. The third one had seemed physically okay, but had gone insane, for all she had talked about, was how the Zephenidians were God's wrath on the unfaithful sinners, though she accepted my sexual advances quite readily. The fourth one that I had sex with, couldn't, or wouldn't, speak English, just Spanish or Portuguese, though it was possible she was just too traumatized to speak a second language. This meant no real news from the outside, and the Human interaction on the whole was poor at best. My hope of escape was also dampened. I knew escape would be futile at best, since there would be no way off of this planet unless I could steal a ship, and manage to learn to pilot the damn thing without being able to read Zephenidian.

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The tubecar provided a smooth rapid ride. For the first fifteen minutes, it was just me and my captor aboard the subway-like vehicle. The car diverted from the main tunnel to another landing, where the car slowed and came to a halt. Two more Zephenidians boarded and sat at the

other end of the car. Both stared at me like they had never seen a Human before, and chances were, they probably hadn't seen one out on a leash. The car began to accelerate rapidly. The tube, seen through the windows, was mostly black, with rings of lights which began to speed by until it became a gray and white blur. After another fifteen minutes or so, the car slid into another tunnel, and slowed before coming to a stop. My captor lead me from the doors of the tube-car onto a large outdoor platform, with stairs leading up in several directions. Tall buildings towered overhead, with rows of lighted windows, appearing more like a modern familiar city. Zephenidians swarmed up and down the wide stairways, barking and yapping to one another. Some had young yipping at their knees like bipedal puppies. Despite how controlled their society was, when it came to the idea of personal space, it was practically non-existent. Some of them traveled in small groups huddled together, often grooming each other's necks with their tongues and teeth, or licking each other's faces or mouths, or even full-on kissing. Many of the Zephenidians gave me more than a casual glance, and I wondered if many of them were thinking how tasty I would be in a stew. I was lead up a wide stairway, towards a low sprawling building, with a large brightly lit archway. Crowds of Zephenidians milled about, and the air was filled with a strong canine musk. Through the archway, several desks were arranged around the perimeter of the brightly-lit room. As I passed one desk, I noticed what appeared to be a stack of brochures. Each had a picture of a ship on it. The ship had a wedge shaped main hull with two pencil-like engine nacelles on its sides, along with several struts which lead from the rear of the wedge to a spiked sphere. I knew that this was a *Morningstar* class Zephenidian vessel, the same type that ended my field trip early. Streaks of yellow-orange were shown, spewing from a gun-mount on the leading edge of the ship, which lashed gaping holes in a large angular vessel in the foreground, which I figured was a Terran commercial transport. A large poster was behind the desk showing a Human hung by his ankles, his genitals a bloody hole, and his intestines hanging from a large opening in his belly. A blurred sign was in the background and I could make out the slanted lettering as "FasTrans," the name of a large passenger transit company. This was the first thing I had read since I had been captured. The Zephenidian yanked my chain hard, nearly pulling me off my feet, and I resumed following him.

The lobby lead into a short tunnel, which turned right. The tunnel was crowded, warm, and stuffy, which was actually a bit of a relief from the cold outside. It ended at a large circular

room with large glassy disks along the perimeter, separated from the rest of the room by rails and gates. The air in the room was almost uncomfortably warm, and it buzzed and whined from teleportation equipment. I unwrapped the blanket from my body and bundled it in my arms as I was lead through the room. Four Zephenidians stepped onto one of the disks, and closed the gate behind themselves. Three of them stood in the disk's center, as the fourth approached a console which stood atop a slender pedestal. The creature slid a card through a slot on the console, then pressed a number of buttons, before joining the other three on the disk. A blue-green cylinder of light formed around them, accompanied by a rising resonating hum. Rings of blazing light formed in the middle of the cylinder, and split, with one ring moving up, and the other one moving down. The Zephenidians shimmered and dissolved in the field, and vanished. When the rings reached the top and bottom of the cylinder, they reversed and converged, and the rising hum began to fall. When they met, they faded, along with the field and the noise. At another nearby disk, rings of energy converged as shapes shimmered and formed, and the fields vanished revealing more Zephenidians, who opened the gate to join the teeming crowd. Though Lutrians and Zephenidians had been practically enemies for nearly three hundred years, their transporter technology still remained almost identical.

I was pulled onto a disk, and my owner closed the gate. He inserted a card into a slot on a console mounted on a pedestal, and then keyed something onto the keypad. He removed the card, then he stepped onto the disk and stood beside me. A blue-green energy field formed around us as a low rising hum filled the air. A ring of brilliance formed around me and the Zephenidian, and it split, and another ring formed, and divided. My feet tingled slightly as I watched the bustling crowd waver, shimmer a bit, then dissolve into the blue-green of the field. There was a sensation of movement as everything dissolved, much like an elevator, due to changes in gravity during the transport process. The rings converged, and the light began to brighten. A sun formed, tinted by the field, vegetation, and a small group of Zephenidians took shape. As my view solidified, the field vanished, and the hum faded. I was standing on a similar disk in what appeared to a courtyard.

I wondered if I was even on the same planet, though I knew it had to be, since transporters were limited in range to a few thousand kilometers. As I stepped from the disk, I realized that this area wasn't outdoors, but in a kind of enclosed plaza, illuminated by sunlight

which streamed in through several huge skylights, overhead. There were only three other transporter disks, which occupied the back wall of the plaza. Trees, shrubs, and vines filled the area with various shades of deep green, with spots of red, violet, yellow, and white from the variety of vegetation, much of it was blooming. A large marble statue of a dignified Zephenidian stood on top of a tall marble base in the very center of the plaza. Several fountains and waterfalls trickled and splashed, obscured by the vegetation, making this whole place seem surreal and alive. The air was warm and moist, and was scented with the smell of greenery and flowers. My owner lead me through the plaza and over a footbridge where a stream flowed around and over decorative stones. This could have easily passed as a Japanese garden, if one overlooked the fact that all the people were bipedal wolves. Beyond the footbridge, and through a large open archway, was a sandy beach, with trees which closely resembled palms. Outside the plaza, the air was warm and humid, with the unmistakable smell of the nearby ocean. A walkway snaked from the plaza towards the beach, where it disappeared under drifts of sand. The ocean was cobalt blue with emerald and aquamarine shoals and reefs. The sea roared gently as waves broke onto the shoals, forming lines of foam, where they reformed into smaller waves, before washing onto the sand. Though the sun shone brightly, it appeared slightly smaller and dimmer than earth's sun. Other than the minor astronomical anomalies and the appearance of the locals, this place could have passed for an earth resort. This was likely a tropical area, possibly an island located near the planet's equator. I let part of my blanket drop, and I dragged it behind me.

The Zephenidian lead me along the walkway, and onto the beach. "*Shit!*" I cursed as I stepped onto the hot sand, knowing that the Zephenidian couldn't understand me. I tip toed and hopped on the shifting sun-baked sand. After a short distance, we turned left and followed the shoreline along another footpath, which ran parallel to the shoreline a couple hundred yards, before turning away from the ocean. The path lead to a large grassy field with numerous benches suggesting it was some kind of park. A high chain-link fence surrounded an area about twenty meters across, and two trailers were located near the gate of the fence. Inside the enclosure were several Humans lounging on the grass, three males and two females. Another Zephenidian emerged from the small trailer to converse with my captor, then he handed him a brown and yellow piece of paper that might have been some form of currency. The other

Zephenidian looked similar to my captor, except that the fur under its arms was braided, and he lacked the brownish gray markings on his back. He wore a padded leather guard over his sheath and testicles, which was held on by straps around his legs and waist. He opened the large gate as my captor unclipped the chain from my harness, then he pushed me into the enclosure. The gate clanked shut behind me. Looking up, I could see that even the top of the enclosure was meshed to prevent Humans from escaping. Ahead of me were the filthy occupants of the enclosure basking in the sun.

Five naked Humans lay before me, two of which were female, and all looked extremely filthy, appearing dazed and morose. It was as if they had lost the will to live. In any normal circumstances, I would not have had anything to do with them. These were not normal circumstances. Trying to do what my captor expected of me, with a major language barrier getting in the way, was definitely a challenge. Only those who could figure out the charade, survived for any length of time. Those who didn't, well, Zephenidians are carnivores and Humans are meat.

I approached a woman who appeared somewhat less grimy than the others, with long matted dark-brown hair, and well-rounded breasts. I saw stretch marks on her bare belly, which suggested that she might have given birth recently. If she had given birth while on this planet, I feared what fate might have befallen the baby. Fighting the horrible images in my mind, I dropped my blanket beside her. Under the blanket, I wore nothing, except for the straps of the harness. I touched the woman on her shoulder, grasped her, then tried to gently push her onto her back.

“What the fuck are you doing, asshole?” she hissed. Her accent seemed vaguely British or Australian or some weird combination of the two.

“It's weenie time,” I said, as I displayed my rising manhood, and tightened my grip on her shoulder. “This is all we have to live for. This and hope of rescue. Hope that the Federation will invade this rock.” I tried to push her onto her back again.

She swung her hand and it impacted my scrotum, causing me to double over in pain. As the pain flowed from my testicles to the pit of my stomach, I released my grip on her shoulder, and fell on my side, in the grass. She snarled, “If you come at me again like that, I'll rip them off and make you eat them.”

I groaned as the pain dulled a bit, and moved further into the sick recesses of my intestines. I staggered to my knees. “Listen bitch! I have an owner who was paid by your owner to have me fuck your brains out. If I don't start slamming my ham into you, right now, we both could have our intestines ripped out and our genitals lightly grilled.”

“You want to slam ham? Slam it with your right hand.” She waved her loosely clenched fist up and down. “Get in a good wank and leave me the fuck alone. Or go pester the others.”

“Goddamn you!” I yelled through clenched teeth. I had my mind set on her, since the other female looked worse, possibly diseased. “You'll get us both killed!”

She got to her feet and waved her arms about. “What's there to live for? I played their game before. I ended up here about a year ago, I guess. I got pregnant shortly after I arrived. I really didn't want to raise a kid on this piece of shit planet, but I decided to, just in case rescue came, which ain't going to happen. Well, the kid came out okay,” she collapsed to her knees and started sobbing, “But, those wolf-bastards came in, and tore the baby away from me, with the cord still attached, and they tore out my afterbirth. I thought I would die from all the bleeding. They took my baby!” She was shuddering. “They didn't cradle the kid in their arms, like they cared for it. They slung it by the cord like it was a piece of meat.” Her voice wavered, “They took it away to kill it. I watched the wolf-fuck smash my baby's head against a wall, then they skinned it as I watched. I think they tanned my baby's hide into some kind of nasty shorts or dick protector, whatever they call it.”

“Shit! Sorry about that.” I had heard that the Zephenidians found the meat of children especially tasty, but I thought, or rather hoped, that it was mostly mere rumor. Rumors of Zephenidians using baby hides for leather was also not new to me, and the thought made my skin crawl worse than the worms inside my bowels. However, I had to get back to the business at hand to appease my captor. “Look, I really need to do it. If we don't perform, the Zephs are gonna have me neutered without anesthesia, then pull my intestines out my ball sac hole to play with until I croak. They'll probably spay you with their teeth as well.”

“Fuck the Zephs!” she snapped. “There is nothing to live for. I'd gladly pull out my uterus and cook it for them, and barbecue my ovaries on sticks, if they want.” She got back to her feet and glared towards the gate. She pointed to the other Zephenidian. “That wolf's wearing my baby. Next time he comes in here, I'll kick his ass. The rest of the apes,” she motioned

towards the other Humans, “would likely be picking bits of me off of the grass, but I don't give a fuck.”

“Wait!” I said as I got to my feet. The pain of my testicles had now settled into an annoying throbbing ache. “You're the most rational person I've met so far, which isn't saying much.” I mentioned the lobotomized women, and the schizo I had met previously. “The only other rational woman I screwed, didn't speak English, and they don't issue Mindlink translators around here.”

“What do you want then, a mind fuck or--”

“No. You arrived here more recently then I have. Any news from the civilized world?”

“What news!” she growled. “What do you think I am, FedNews or something?” She spat on the ground.

“I just want to know if actual war has begun between our people and the Zephenidians.”

“Those Lutrian chicken shits on N’Gron, or whatever the hell it's called, seem to just sit on their furry asses and let the poor merchants do the fighting for them.” she said through clenched teeth. “I wasn’t taken from a ship, if that is what you’re wondering. They took me from the T’Kahtah II settlement.”

“T’Kahtah II?” I asked. I knew about that planet and all the controversy about it being established so close to the Zephenidian border. It was the final destination of the ship I was in, after it dropped me off at Torresia II. In fact the name “T’Kahtah” was a corruption of a Zephenidian phrase for “little golden sun” since its star was of spectral class K, and was located right on the wolves’ doorstep, or as so many cynics put it, right on their dinner plate. I feared that this planet would be a flash-point to some conflict. In fact, many, including me, felt that it had been colonized specifically as a provocative act towards the Zephenidians.

“The fuckers sent a fleet of ships in, and drove off a Lutrian *Striker* class cruiser,” she growled under her breath. “They drove away the defenses, then bombarded us with ground-assault plasma torpedoes. Then they transported the troops to the surface to start their plunder. I tried to hold out as long as I could with my trusty sparker, but only had one energy cell. The rest were lost when my house blew up. I think I killed two or three, but I got zapped with a stunner when I was trying to break into a neighbor’s weapons cabinet to scavenge more cells. There must have been hundreds of us crammed into a dingy hold. Half didn’t survive the journey.”

She spat on the ground again.

“Shit,” I cursed. “Why am I not surprised?”

“The federation is not going to rescue us. They couldn’t even protect a colony from an all-out attack. How do you expect them to invade a home planet?” She started walking toward the gate. “Now it's time for me to leave this place.”

“Wait!” I yelled out to her. “Why can't you try to live, or at least wait until I leave first. I need to screw you!”

She turned towards me, and shouted, “I’d rather fuck a Zephenidian! No chance of pregnancy, though they have this knob thing at the base of their dicks which gets stuck in you for a bit. My owner fucked me a few times. You’ve ever seen a Zeph dick?”

I hoped that mentioning my abuse may gain some sympathy. “My owner made me blow one of his friends a couple of times.” I remembered that a section of the shaft near the base swelled up to half the size of my fist, a bit like a dog's penis, from what I've read.

This might have gained some sympathy, but not the kind I wanted. She shouted, “Look at you! Your color's bad, and I can see nearly every bone in your body. You look like one of those old famine pictures from a couple of centuries ago. Is your owner even feeding you, or are your guts crawling with worms?” She pointed at the side of my chest, “Are those scabs, or have you been sleeping in your own shit!” She waved her hand at the prominent scars on my right arm, “Was your owner just being kinky, or did you piss him off.” She fixed her gaze back on me. “I know jaundice when I see it, and you look pretty yellow to me. The food here is all wrong. Too much protein and not enough carbs, which fucks up your kidneys and makes your piss all funky. The fat doesn't help, much, since it just goes right through you after a while. I’ve seen people die from simple vitamin deficiencies here which are just not seen anywhere else. I’ve watched friends here shit and puke themselves till they died of dehydration. I’ve had other friends go nuts. We’re all infested with fleas, lice, and worms!. A friend who was here before me mentioned that two people even died from Ka’losian brain slugs, which shows how careless these mutts are even with their own planet.” She paused to catch her breath. “This is one huge planet sized Auschwitz! The common Zeph's are treated like shit by their Establishment so they take it out on their pets, ah, livestock, and each other. Look, I'm not going to hang around and wait for the vitamin deficiencies to set in, or for brain slugs to turn me into a drooling vegetable.”

I said, "My name is Don, or as my owner calls my, *Vashkuuff* or something like that."

"Thanks for coming here, Don Vash McDog Chow. You've given me the courage to do what has to be done. See you in hell." The other Zephenidian was pacing just outside the fence, where he paused to let out a low growl, before opening the gate. My owner guarded the gate, as the other one approached. The woman screamed and charged her captor. "Die wolf-fuck bastard!" She leaped at the Zephenidian, but the creature swung an arm and slammed her to the ground. With a bound befitting its wolf heritage, the Zephenidian leaped on her, and I tried to force myself to look away, but it was too late. The alien wolf grabbed her throat in its teeth and she struggled. She gurgled, gasped, and choked, as the flesh of her neck tore with a sickening wet ripping sound. Blood sprayed onto the grass and her body jerked and convulsed while still gurgling through her torn throat. The alien wolf got back to its feet, with deep red blood dripping from the fur of its chin as he muttered something which sounded like, "*kho blu hu'pukh!*" as he kicked the dead body which lay at his feet, before turning away

I fought waves of nausea as I grabbed my blanket and staggered towards the gate. When I reached my captor, he swung his arm, which slammed into my back, knocking me to the ground. The Zephenidian stared down at me and growled fiercely. I feared that I was about to die horribly, so I dropped my blanket, got to my feet, and bolted towards the surf. The ocean looked inviting, and I thought about diving into the sea in an attempt to swim to safety or to a watery grave. I reached the beach, and skipped over the hot sand, and fell twice, but struggled back to my feet. Looking back, I saw my owner following, though he, too, seemed to be having trouble maintaining his footing on the searing shifting sand. The sand became cool, wet, and firm, as a nearly expended breaker lazily eased over my feet, cooling them. With the Zephenidian rapidly loping towards me, I had to act fast and decisively, but there was little I felt that I could do. I couldn't fight him, not without assuring a quick death for myself, and trying to swim out would be a gamble to be sure. I had to try to prove, again, that I was no mere animal, and I had to do it fast.

I knelt down, and started drawing with my finger. First a rough wedge shape, lines from the flat end forming the struts, and a circle with several short lines coming from it. My owner stopped behind me, as I was drawing the engine nacelles. He seemed to stare at my crude drawing of a Zephenidian *Morningstar* class vessel. Again, the Zephenidian slammed an elbow

into my back, and I fell onto the wet sand. A cool breaker washed over me, and my drawing diffused and melted into the surf. The Zephenidian leaped onto me. He rolled me onto my back, then brought his jaws towards my throat. I fought for a few seconds, before realizing how easily he had overpowered me, so I went limp and waited for him to kill me, or finish his bluff. Another surge of water washed across my body, splashing into my right ear. The creature brought his open jaws to my neck and gently gripped my throat in his teeth. I held my breath as I felt the four points of his canine teeth pressing against the sides of my trachea, with his hot moist breath blowing across my neck. For a moment, I feared my throat was already destroyed, since I was full of adrenaline, and I couldn't tell whether the wet was my blood, or his saliva. He held my neck for what seemed like an eternity, though it was likely mere seconds, before he released my throat, roughly rolled me onto my belly, and re-fastened the chain to my harness. I cautiously drew in a breath, as I reached my hand to my neck, and found that it was intact. The Zephenidian got to his feet, and jerked my chain hard, until I got to my feet, then pulled me towards the walkway. The other Zephenidian was waiting on the walkway, and as I walked past him, the creature thrust the blanket into my hands. I grasped the old smelly hide, and dragged it behind me. My owner yanked the chain more urgently as I paused to brush some of the caked sand off of my body. I was in a daze, not knowing if what I had done had any impact on my captor. I felt I was going to die soon, either through the actions of my captor, or, as that woman observed, death caused by liver or kidney failure. I felt desperate to force my owner to see the truth, even if it meant dying in the process. I turned toward the Zephenidian as he lead me over the footbridge, and said, "I wish you can understand me for once." He responded with a low deep growl as he continued to lead me through the plaza towards the transporter disks. The Zephenidian used his card and keyed something into the console, then he pulled me onto the disk.

Blue-green light and bright bands of energy formed, as the sunny area blurred and shimmered away. The previous transporter station took shape, then the energy fields vanished. Crowds of Zephenidians bustled along, though the numbers had thinned somewhat. My captor unlatched the gate, and I followed him from the disk. I noticed a trio of odd creatures which resembled large Humans in spacesuits, but their faces seen through the front of the helmets appeared large, and bulbous. Two of them whistled and clicked to each other. The third one who

had some kind of Mindlink translator spoke, and as it talked. I could feel its words emanate from its mind, but they also seemed verbal at the same time. “Cruel creatures. They think of Humans as non-sentient animals, so they can use them as a delicacy for their elite rulers.”

Another creature clicked and whistled, apparently in agreement. I had heard of these creatures and seen them in photographs, but never in the flesh. These were Niquentorians, creatures that live on a planet with an atmosphere much denser than Earth. They came from an area near Motrician space somewhat rimward and anti-spinward of Zephenidian space. These creatures traded with the Zephenidians, Motricians, and even the Federation, despite being far more technologically advanced.

I yelled towards the creature as I passed, “Help! Help! This Zephenidian is going to kill me. Help!”

The Niquentorian with the translator clicked to a Zephenidian who bore some official looking emblems on the fur that hung beneath its arms, “You fools, Humans are sentient creatures. Why is your kind so cruel? Release the Human to us.” I grew nervous. What that Niquentorian said would likely result in summery execution, and I expected the Niquentorian to die where it stood. What little I knew about Niquentorians, was that they had a tendency to act on impulse, especially in the face of extreme injustice. I now feared for the creature.

The Zephenidian official barked angrily at the Niquentorian.

The Niquentorian draw a pistol on the officer, and fired. A blue-white lance of energy tore into the officer's chest, and exploded out the side of its back, showering me and my owner with a cascade of sparks, bits of charred flesh, and flakes of soot. With a gurgling moan, the Zephenidian official fell, clutching a gaping smoldering hole which exposed several blackened ribs. The crowd began to scatter, and some of the Zephenidians were squealing, shrieking, whining, and whimpering. Zephenidians jostled me and my owner as they panicked. A few started to drop to the floor, and my owner did the same, and yanked me down hard, by my chain. A large group of armed officers wearing padded vests and sheath-guards charged in from the main tunnel, some brandishing small hand weapons, while a few carried large plasma rifles. Spears of blue-hot energy began flying in all directions. Walls and consoles exploded into sparks. Streamers of slag, and rivulets of white-hot metal flowed down walls and panels from where they were hit. A pop sounded, followed by a hiss, as a Niquentorian shrieked and pawed

at a smoking rip in its suit. It fell into a heap and made a faint bubbling moan. The other two returned fire, blasting one guard almost in half, and two more fell as their legs were blown apart from the high energy plasma weapons the Niquentorians wielded. The smell of burnt plastic and scorched metal filled my nostrils, and the stink of burnt flesh made me nauseous. An alarm screamed, and a synthetic barking Zephenidian voice filled the room. The two surviving Niquentorians continued their covering fire as they backed onto a nearby transport disk. One futilely tried to access the terminal with a card, but a harsh buzz suggested that all the transporters had been disabled by security. The alien tore the useless card from the console, and sprang to the disk. It pressed a button under its helmet, then clicked and squealed. The guards rushed at the two aliens on the platform as orange spindles of energy surrounded the creatures, accompanied by an ear splitting whine. The spindles rotated around the aliens as the guards fired at them. The beams flashed against the spindles, with no effect, as the aliens dissolved into gold and green glitter. The spindles remained for several more seconds, before shrinking away, and the whine subsided. The guards stared at the empty disk for several seconds, before they turned, and hurried back towards the main passageway, barking and growling to each other.

My owner pulled me to my feet, and then shoved me forward, towards the tunnel. Many Zephenidians remained on the ground, and I saw that several of them had large charred wounds on their bodies. Clouds of thick choking smoke hung in the air, smelling of burnt things, both formerly alive and synthetic, tinged with the added musk of frightened alien wolf. Jagged holes dotted some of the walls and panels, many of which arced and sparked intermittently.

The floor suddenly shook, and the ceiling above the main tunnel buckled. Dust and debris began to trickle down from above, pelting me and my captor. Lights flashed red and more alarms buzzed. A loud Zephenidian voice barked and yapped an urgent message from an intercom. A large section of the ceiling began to break apart and collapse around me. My owner yanked me more urgently towards the crumbling entrance to the tunnel, and I hurried to keep up with him, as I dodged several large chunks of concrete which fell around me. The floor shook again, and a large support beam just missed me as it slammed hard and thunderously onto the floor behind me. A shower of red sprayed from under the beam, and soaked a hapless Zephenidian with gore. Looking back, I could see where the beam had crashed to the floor, leaving a cone of blood and the gray and pink curds of brain tissue from where a hapless

Zephenidian used to stand. Another hard jerk of the chain urged me towards the passageway, through the tunnel, and into the lobby. Swarms of panicked Zephenidians pushed and shoved as I was dragged towards the main exit.

The cold air bit into my flesh as I emerged from the building, and my feet burned against the cold, wet concrete. I wrapped the blanket tightly around my body in an attempt to fight the chill of the icy outdoor air. Looking towards the building, I saw the faint orange glow of the approaching dawn. Zephenidians poured onto the sidewalk, and down the stairs to the tubecar landing. I was lead down the stairs, and onto the loading platform next to the glass tube. Tubecars stopped, and Zephenidians entered, and the cars sped off. Soon, my owner pulled me into an open car, the door slid closed, and the tube blurred with motion.

The return trip seemed to stretch on forever, as I braced myself for what might happen when I arrived back in my room. This day did not turn out well, with the nasty suicide, and the attack on the station. I was a witness and an indirect cause of a terrorist attack which probably killed dozens of Zephenidians. This could potentially start a war between the Zephenidians and the Niquentorians, which the Zephenidians could not possibly win. If my captor suspected this, I was probably as good as dead. There wasn't much for me to look forward to. If there was an incident which could prove me as a liability, today's double-whammy was all the proof he would need. The sense of foreboding grew stronger with each minute that passed. I tried to mentally prepare for what might be a fight to the death.

Eventually, the tube slowed, the car stopped, and the door slid aside. I stepped out of the car, and was lead up the stairway to the freezing outside air. The twin moons hung low in the deep purple morning sky, with the bright red star just above them. The sky behind me glowed brightly orange along the horizon. Ahead was the ring of houses. The snow burned and stung my feet again as we made our way to the flat-topped dome that my owner called home. He opened the door, and lead me into the relative warmth of his abode, then closed the door behind him.

My mind was numb as the Zephenidian brought me to the door of my room. He roughly pulled the blanket from around me and fumbled at the catch of the harness as he worked to unbuckle it. He was shaking and his hands were very unsteady, not to mention, the creature's musk was more intense. I was shuddering as well, pumped full of adrenaline, waiting to fight

back, no matter how futile. With my harness off, the creature pushed me hard into my room, causing me to almost lose my footing as my foot slipped in a cold wet pool of decomposing slime. He threw my blanket into the room, then closed the door, and engaged the lock with a loud click.

The room was quiet, except for the occasional chirps of the local wildlife outside. I wiped the bulk of the crud off my feet, as I slowly made my way to the far corner of the room, where I slowly sat down and wrapped my blanket tightly around my thin frame. As I huddled in the corner, many thoughts about what had happened during the last few hours filled my mind. *Why did that woman have to flip out like that, I thought. Did I drive her to her death?* Then there was the attack on the Transport Station, and possible war. Cramps began to wrack my abdomen again, and as turned my gaze to the floor. The spatter of my last diarrhea had darkened to a deep olive-brown, and the rice-like tapeworm segments were no longer moving, and had turned a deep tan color. Further from me, a six-inch long spaghetti-like roundworm was poking out from under a pile of semi-petrified excrement. I fought the urge to vomit, which would further add to the colonies of microbes and parasites which were having a party on the floor, and I worried that some new diseases might be evolving.

Something was going on outside my room. I felt it, and thought I could smell it, and it was not the stink of the ecosystem which was evolving on the floor in front of me. My captor was nervous, and nervous Zephenidians often have a certain musky smell about them which is stronger and sharper than their usual canine scent. He also seemed to have trouble working the catch on my harness. It was as if his brain was working in ways which were unfamiliar to him. Would his faith in the *Establishment of Prukak* be shaken, or had it become more resolute? The room remained quiet save for the harsh call of a bird, which sounded like some kind of crow.

A strange rising hum sounded faintly from the other side of the door, though I wasn't sure if I was imagining it. It was similar to the sound of the transporter system used in the transit station. *I'm losing it, now. Everything is sounding like transporters. Am I losing my grip on reality? Am I thinking too much of a rescue that will never come?* Everything was quiet, as the sky slowly turned a dull steel gray. The bird continued its harsh cawing as the morning wore on. The rising buzzing transporter sound jolted me from my thoughts again. The room was almost silent, the bird having apparently flown away, and in my mind, I felt it was too quiet. Even the

wind was nonexistent, making the quiet seem almost oppressive. The quiet was interrupted by the sound of clawed feet, which clicked past the door of my room, followed by a thud as if a bulky object was dropped to the floor. The clicks of clawed feet resumed and seemed to move past my door again. I slowly got to my feet and moved cautiously to the doorway, where I crouched and place my ear against the wood of the door. It was quiet at first, then the clawed feet clicked slowly past, accompanied by the scraping of a large object being dragged along the floor. The scraping stopped. After several seconds, a low buzzing hum disturbed the quiet, and it rose in pitch. I noticed a faint blue-green glow from beneath the door. The hum rose, and the light under the door cast shifting shadows on the floor in front of the doorway. The light dimmed, and the hum faded, along with the light. *My owner has just transported away, I thought. He must have his own ship, or has just stolen one. Why would he steal a ship? I'm not losing my mind after all.* I knew that now, something strange was happening. *Did he know or suspect that I was not some mere animal? Was he trying to flee the planet? Where does this leave me? I'm stranded in a locked room, with no means of escape, no food or water, and no Zephenidian to possibly allow for a quick death.* I staggered back to my feet and walked towards the window. This was the most promising means of escape. I pushed my hands against the glass, but felt no give to it. I tried to lightly pound on the glass with my fist, but all that did was make my hand sore. Inspecting the window, I saw that the pane appeared to be glued into the frame. I figured that if I could find a nail, I could maybe pry the pane loose from the frame, if I worked at it for a few hours. Even if I succeeded, the window might be too small to squeeze through, though with how skinny I had become, maybe it wouldn't be particularly difficult. I stepped away from the window, and gazed at the floor around me, hoping I could find something small and sharp so I could attack the window. The prospect of rummaging around in my own parasite laden waste was not something I looked forward to.

As I thought about how I was going to escape, I began to realize just how quiet things had become again in the house. There was no sign of activity, just the stillness of the air. There was the flutter of some large bird flying past the window, but then all was very quiet again. The house remained silent. No footsteps, no creaking of the floor, nothing. My fears were confirmed. I was now trapped in an abandoned dwelling. Escape was imperative. I searched the floor for anything which might allow me to work the window loose, though all I found were

scraps of old food, and piles of my own worm-ridden filth. After many minutes of frantic visual searching, I found nothing useful. I slowly stepped backwards, towards the door as I gazed at the window, and surveyed the situation again.

A buzzing hum filled the air, and everything began to take a slight milky blue-green hue. The hum became louder and rose in pitch, and I shielded my eyes as blazing rings formed, and diverged. As the gravity shifted, I realized that I had not been abandoned. My heart started racing as the room dissolved in the blue-green glitter of the energy field. The rings reversed, and converged. An alcove with dull gray metal walls, solidified around me. The sound dropped in pitch and volume, and then the field vanished and the hum faded.

I stood in an alcove on a raised platform, with a red disk filling its width. Ahead of me, was the ship's tiny bridge, appearing like a cockpit with two seats, a sprawling control panel, and a panoramic viewport above the console, revealing the star-flecked blackness outside. The floor vibrated slightly and there was a slight rumbling due to the ship's engines. My owner stood in front of the alcove, eying me, then he turned and gestured to where two Zephenidians lay dead on the floor near the cockpit. Both bodies had deep charred burns on their backs, caused by point-blank plasma weapon fire. *He must have murdered the crew.* He motioned toward the bodies again. I dropped the blanket onto the transporter disk, and slowly stepped out of the alcove, not sure what my owner wanted. He grabbed an arm of one of the bodies, and barked "*Vashkuuff*" as he pointed to the other corpse. I stepped over to the body that my owner indicated. The left wall was inset into the main room, and had an open door revealing a small airlock. The right wall was also inset, but lined with lockers. He motioned towards the open chamber, before he dragged the body into the airlock and laid it in a fetal position on the floor. The body was limp and heavy as I cautiously dragged the other corpse inside the airlock chamber, and placed it next to the first one. Once I propped the body against the outer airlock door in a semi-sitting position, I stepped backwards out of the chamber before my captor might be tempted to vent the airlock, with me in it. The Zephenidian pressed a button, and a heavy door with a small window, slid closed. He pressed another button which caused a brief hiss from the chamber as the outer door slid open. Through the window, I could see the Zephenidian corpses tumble slowly into the starry void, spewing faint trails of blue-gray fog. The bodies fell downward and disappeared from view, as they were caught in the shear of the ship's artificial

gravity.

My owner hurried to the console, and sat in the right seat, and motioned urgently to the other seat. I gingerly approached the seat, and as I slowly sat down, the Zephenidian adjusted a throttle. The engine rumble became a roar, and the vibrations became more intense. On the screen, the stars wildly panned around, then stabilized. The Zephenidian pressed a button above the throttle, before pulling the throttle further back. The ship lurched and there was a flash from the view screen. The ship started shaking and rocking more intensely. Streaks and swirls of blues, greens, and violets flowed by on the viewport. I surmised that this was an old ship, likely a *Killslay*, or as it's known in Zephenidian, a *Kha'Szhyk* class vessel, with drives that would be more at home in a museum than on an operational spaceship. The streaks became a broken tunnel of blue and green mist, forming eddies and swirls as they passed as the ship's drives seem to labor. The ship's age further showed in how rough the transition through borderspace was, as I found it difficult to keep from being lurched out of my seat. The heaving deck reminded me of being on an ocean vessel in rough choppy seas. I steadied myself as best I could, and held onto the armrests of the seat. The mist was sweeping by at an increased speed as the ship continued to accelerate. For several minutes, the ship heaved and shuddered as the engine rumbled and whined. Some minutes passed as the tunnel of mist rushed past at an increasing rate of speed. The Zephenidian pressed another button, and the screen flashed blue-green once again, causing the ship to lurch one last time. The streaks and mist remained, but the stars were gone, and the shaking subsided. The ship had made its transition to hyperspace, and hopefully, safety. The Zephenidian drew the throttle further back, and the engine whine increased in volume and pitch, before slowly stabilizing and subsiding to a gentle oscillating thrum.

I watched the mists on the view screen, and was very anxious at what was happening. The murder of the ship's crew made me very uneasy. *Is my owner now insane? Where is he fleeing to, and why is he taking me?* I looked towards my captor and noticed him staring intently at me, and this made me even more uneasy. His ears were pinned back, and his teeth were slightly bared, which could be anger, or just his being hyped on adrenaline like I was. We gazed at each other for several minutes, before he slowly averted his eyes, rose from his seat, and slowly backed towards the bulkhead. The creature stood with his back against the wall for several moments, before locking his gaze on me once again, before slowly edging towards the

rear of the bridge. The starboard door, next to the transporter alcove, slid aside automatically as he neared it. He stared at me for a few moments, then he turned, and rushed through the open door, and the door slid closed.

I was alone at the console, not sure what had just happened. *Did he flip out?* I thought. *Was he harming himself on the other side of the door?* As much as I feared him, and resented him for the years of mistreatment, I did not want to see the Zephenidian die, at least not until I was safe. I studied the console and saw what appeared like simplified hieroglyphics, basically an alien alphabet. A few of the symbols could pass for familiar letters, such as o's, i's t's (though the cross bars were slanted), and some w's, but with an extra down stroke. Looking at the controls themselves, I noted the throttle between the two seats, and a manual control column in the center of the right-hand section of the console. Buttons and display screens covered most of the remaining console space. The console would have been daunting even without the language barrier. I knew that if the Zephenidian died, I would be unable to operate the ship. At best, I figured that I might use the throttle to bring the ship out of hyperspace, but I'd likely wind up in the middle of nowhere, to die once food or air ran out. There was the possibility of experimenting with the ships controls, to learn how to operate it, but there was always the possibility of doing something wrong, causing the ship to explode, or causing an ejection of the hyperdrive system, or worse. Piloting this ship would be a virtual impossibility since I had never operated any space vehicle before, so who was I kidding. My only chance of survival, was to keep the wolf alive.

Things were beginning to make sense. My owner was suspecting the truth, that Humans are sentient beings, and he may have taken this rather hard. Helping him dump the bodies out the airlock would have easily convinced him that I was a sentient creature. I hated him for what he had done, but on one level, I tried not to totally fault him for this. Without him, I would have died with the other captives, having been processed into meat for the *Establishment*. He was a product of the *Establishment*, where independent thought was at the very least discouraged, and in many cases, outlawed entirely. Though, I wasn't particularly fond of him because of this, I didn't want him to harm himself. Chances are, there would be a fleet out there, looking for a stolen ship, and a murderer, which would be us. I got to my feet, and walked over to the door. It slid aside, revealing a dimly lit narrow corridor, with conduits and a light strip running along the

ceiling. The corridor was only about ten meters, long, where it turned to my right, to join the corridor on the other side of the ship. There was two doors on the left wall, and one on the right wall, near the end of the corridor. There was a faint lupine whimper and moan coming from behind the nearest door. I turned to the door, and reached towards it. It didn't open, and appeared to not be automatic. There was a hand grip on the right side of the door. I grasped it, and heaved the door to the left, and it gave some resistance as it slid aside. The room was a dark sleeping quarters, with a wide shelf-like bed jutting from the back wall, covered with animal hide blankets. A small desk was against the near wall, with a computer or terminal on it. The room was illuminated only by the sporadic green and blue flickers from the view port on the wall over the bed. The blanket appeared to shift and whimper.

I took a few steps into the room while continuing to watch the pile of shifting blankets. The Zephenidian was either unaware of me, or no longer cared, possibly testing me to see if I'd kill him, or take some other kind of revenge upon him. I thought about putting the poor Zephenidian out of his misery, but that would leave me stranded in an antiquated ship on a journey to oblivion. *The creature has to know*, I thought. *Maybe I should try to communicate with him.* There must be a Mindlink translator somewhere around here.

The blankets shifted again, and a wolfish head emerged, with faintly glowing orange eyes. Teeth flared white in the unsteady diffuse light, as the Zephenidian growled something that I knew was not a friendly hello. The creature continued to stare, with a bared teeth expression that was quite obviously a show of anger, but the Zephenidian remained on the bed. *Is the anger directed at me, or the Establishment of Prukak, or both?*

I broke the silence, "Where's your translator? I want to talk. I need to know what the hell is going on here!" No response. I touched the middle of my forehead with my forefinger, "I want to talk, goddammit!" I pointed towards the Zephenidian's head, then touched the middle of my forehead again. The Zephenidian's eyes widened. I continued to point at the middle of my forehead, "I want to talk to you, you fucking cur!"

The Zephenidian crawled out from under the blanket, and got unsteadily to his feet. He walked over to a wall, slid a drawer open, and reached inside. The Zephenidian removed a black box, and a headband. He placed the headband around the top of its head, and positioned the lump on the band, which was the sensor module, so it was on the middle of his forehead. Once

the device was in place, he flicked a switch on the box, and adjusted the gain knob with a shaky hand, while fumbling with its straps, as he secured it around his left forearm.

I felt an intense fear emanating from the Zephenidian, which the Mindlink translator transmitted from him. There was also anger, and a strong feeling of betrayal. I always found the strong emotional bombardment from using a Mindlink translator a bit disconcerting at times. Hiding one's motives and emotional state were much more difficult, though not impossible, while using such a translator, though it does work both ways. I fought to maintain my mental and emotional strength as I tried to mentally shield myself from any attempts of his trying to read anything from me. I tried to think of something eloquent to say, something verbal which might hit him like a punch to the face. The Zephenidian eyed me intensely and spoke first. "*Vashkuuff*, can you understand me?"

"My name is Don Mcferron you stupid mutt!" I said abruptly, before remembering that the Zephenidian could actually understand me, now. His ears jerked back slightly, but he didn't otherwise react. I attempted to set a calmer tone. "Yes, I can understand you."

"I didn't think that was your real name, *chuthnu*." I knew that the word "chuthnu" was what Zephenidians called Humans. It's a bit like a collective term, like cattle, and is often used as an insult. "You have every right to be angry. You're free to insult me if you wish. I'll get a weapon so you can kill me, if this is what you wish."

"No, I can't, and I won't kill you." I tried to keep my emotional state as neutral as possible to avoid showing any sign of weakness, but I had to defuse this situation as quickly as possible. If he was now rescuing me, I needed him to live and be in a proper state of mind to increase any chances of success. "If I kill you, I'll die. Who will run the ship?"

The Zephenidian pulled open another drawer. "*Chuthnu*, it's on autopilot. It's navigation-locked on a course which will take you to *Chuthnuhome*."

I suspected that *Chuthnuhome* was the Zephenidian's name for Earth or Sol. "What? You mean earth. That's got to be months away, especially with this old crate. The days on your planet seem similar to the days on earth. How many days away is it?"

"Your Federation space is about twenty days away at our maximum safe speed, provided the autopilot can successfully pilot the ship through the Khaash'narg Expanse. It's a well mapped anomaly field. If the autopilot misses our target, then your space would be nearly fifty

days away. Your planet is about a hundred days away, if we navigate the Expanse, but I'm sure you'll be discovered long before then and rescued. There is enough dry rations and water for you to easily make the trip, even if it took twice as long and if we totally miss the anomaly." He removed a blaster pistol from the drawer. It was a bit larger than the one I used before my capture, with a longer barrel, and lacked a trigger guard. The Zephenidian removed a three inch long, slug-like, power cell from the drawer. He opened a slot on the top of the weapon, placed the cell inside, then closed the cover.

Many disaster scenarios played through my mind. "Look, I don't particularly trust you, but I trust this ship even less. What if metal fatigue causes a hull breach? What if the hyperdrive malfunctions and goes into full inversion? What if a Zephenidian ship tries to stop us? Also, don't we have to drop to normal space periodically to make a navigation check?"

The Zephenidian tried to hand the weapon, stock first, to me. "If you won't kill me, at least keep this with you. You're the *Hhrff* here."

The word *Hhrff* didn't translate into anything, due to the lack of a Human specific linguistic module, though artifacts of its meaning did translate. This word wasn't unfamiliar to me.. *Hhrff* was the Zephenidian word for the captain of a vessel, though it was more akin to a governor and the alpha of the pack. A *Hhrff* was required to represent the *Establishment of Prukak* to the fullest, and to implement its policies. They were expected to meter appropriate punishments to anyone who disobeyed, or who incited dissent. "I'm not your Herf," I said as I realized that I mispronounced the word *Hhrff*. I couldn't run the sounds together into that cough, that Zephenidians do. "I don't represent the *Establishment of Prukak*."

The Zephenidian attempted to hand the weapon to me again as he said, "The *Establishment* is what we're fleeing from, so yes, we should not represent it here." He turned away and began to pace around the room for a moment while still holding the blaster with the barrel pointed down. He turned back to me. "I once looked up to the *Establishment*. I even strived to be a member. I've served a tour on a *Kha'Hurakh* class cruiser in the Hunter fleet. These tours are mostly commerce and patrol related duties, but once in a while, we would enter *chuthnu* space, to obtain *chuthnu* meat to sell to the *Establishment*. I personally killed ten *chuthnu*. I had recently been transferred to a *Hyk'Tashuk* class ship when we attacked your ship. I ended my tour to participate in the *chuthnu* breeding program, hoping that would further my

goal of becoming a full member of the *Establishment of Prukak*. Since the breeding program was becoming more of a sick joke, and was being phased out, I was planning to sign up for another tour, after you died or were killed. A few more tours could have landed me a place in the *Establishment*. Now, I wish to die for my crimes against your people.” He paused and looked down at the floor. “I’ve also killed two of my own people.” he said softly. “When I suspected that you were indeed sentient, I contacted two close friends of mine, who had recently purchased their own ship. It was their idea that I would come and see it, so I went to their ship, and betrayed them. I found a plasma pistol in an open locker, so I used it on them. I killed two of my best friends, so that I could rescue you. That’s why I don’t want to live. If it weren’t for you being here, I probably would have rigged the hyperdrive to explode, or go into full inversion, and rammed the ship into a city or station.”

I was shocked at the idea of his having murdered two of his friends and this didn’t exactly make me any more comfortable, “I didn’t realize that those were friends of yours. I’m sorry you had to do this. I don’t know whether to trust you more, or less, because of this.”

“Do what you feel is right, *chuthnu*. You were going to die there. Two or three years is about the maximum survival time for *chuthnu* on my planet. Many die of self-inflicted trauma, and others suffer from intestinal problems, malnutrition, and parasites. We just lack the proper foods to properly feed your people, or more likely, no one has seriously looked into creating a proper diet. There is also a new problem. Things are about to get much worse for any of your species trapped on my planet.” He pushed the stock of the blaster into my hands again.

I finally took the blaster pistol from the Zephenidian and fidgeted with it. The weapon was heavier than the one I had used before my capture, and it was designed with larger hands in mind. I flexed my fingers around the stock and found that it would be difficult to fire one-handed. “How could things be even worse?” I asked.

“Though I’m not a member of the *Establishment*, my line of work has given me access to privileged information which is not available to the public.” said the Zephenidian as he eyed the blaster in my hands, probably assessing whether I’d actually use it. “A year ago, there was an outbreak of violence at one of the larger pens, and seventy-five *chuthnu* escaped, after killing ten of the guards. About twenty were recaptured or killed. However, the remainder stole a *Marauder* class starship. A guard must have been held hostage and helped them operate the ship,

or the guard might have, like me, discovered the truth and volunteered. There was also Niquentorian involvement. The Niquentorians intercepted the ship, ordered our defenses to back away, then piloted the ship into hyperspace via a remote link. Since then, an order was implemented barring any new live *chuthnu* from being brought to our home planet, or to any of our colonies.”

A nasty sinking feeling nearly overwhelmed me, causing me to stagger. I fought to remain standing, as my mind reached the horrible conclusion. “So today's Niquentorian attack scared your government, and they want to get rid of, or kill, all the remaining live Humans?” I shuddered. “Is that what's happening?”

The Zephenidian fall back onto the bed, and lowered his head to his hands. “Yes. There was an edict by the Prukakian High Council for the immediate destruction of all *chuthnu* on the Homeworld and on any of the colonies. We trade with the Niquentorians, but my people are afraid of them. They’re way beyond anything we, or your Federation, has, so we don’t want to risk a war. Quietly kill and bury, or eat, the evidence, while there are no Niquentorians in our system. Next time a Niquentorian ship enters our system, there will be no *chuthnu*, period. This would be done throughout our entire empire. The only *chuthnu* allowed on any of our planets would have to be in the form of meat.”

The aurora-like mists of hyperspatial travel shone through the window, its illumination played along the walls creating a subdued light show. The Zephenidian continued to sit on the bed, head in his hands, where he whimpered slightly. I still gripped the blaster, but I kept the barrel lowered, as I stood in the shadows. “That’s ah, horrible. I mean, it’s good now that these ah, breeding experiments have ended, but ah, everyone is dead, now, or soon will be.” I paused, and pondered. “So what’s going to happen to me, us, this ship?”

The Zephenidian slowly raised his head, and fixed his gaze on me for a few moments, before rising to his feet. I didn’t raise the blaster, but waited, as he walked past me, and out into the corridor. I followed him as he headed to the cockpit. He sat at the console, and started peering through a scope, then he looked at various monitors, before uttering a moan. “The whole Hunter Fleet has been mobilized. Even ships which were in *chuthnu* space, have been recalled.”

This was not the news I wanted to hear, though I should have known. Clean getaways normally didn't involve dumping corpses out airlocks of stolen vessels in low orbit, where they

could be easily found. Most societies take murder and grand larceny pretty seriously. I eased myself into the other seat as I tried to control my fear and emotions. “I’m sorry about your friends and all.” I sighed as my mind raced. The Humans in the pen at the tropical resort were probably massacred with no hope of fighting back. That crazy woman, and the other one who couldn’t speak English, they probably had blaster barrel’s shoved into their mouths, and had their brains cooked inside their skulls, provided that they were still alive when the edict was signed. “How many of my species were killed or will be killed? How many have died?” My mind wandered back to the current menace, the fleet which promised the same fate for me, and my former captor. The seesaw of hope one minute, then having it dashed the next, was too much for me. I shouted in a wavering voice, “Now it looks like this will all be for nothing. We’ll be dropped from hyperspace, and we’ll be--”

I felt a clawed hand tightly grasp my right arm, which made me jerk away. For a second, I thought I would accidentally discharge the blaster into the console. His claws were blunt but strong. Though the grip was firm, it wasn’t painful. “I think I can do it, *chuthnu*,” he whispered softly. I think I can get you home, safely. Ships in hyperspace can only be detected by the wakes they produce as they travel, and thus can’t be identified directly unless they transmit an identifier code. I served on *Kha’Hurakh* and *Hyk’Tashuk* class ships long enough to have a grasp on how to evade pursuit.”

I still didn’t like the odds. One ship trying to evade an entire fleet for twenty days, or more would be a major undertaking. Even if we made it to the Khaash’narg Expanse, the fleet could easily pursue us, though at least we’d be at the edge of Federation space and might be able to call for help. “How do we go about this?” I asked. I looked at the screen, and watched the tunnel of glowing swirls and eddies flowing by.

He released his grip on my arm, and peered through the scanner scope again. “We can drop out of Hyperspace, and try to hide, but we might be detected by a sentry buoy. I think the best method, is to turn back.”

It was not something I wanted to hear, and this concerned me greatly. “What! If you’re going to turn yourself in, at least let me go out in an escape pod, or the airlock.”

“I’m not going to turn myself in,” said the Zephenidian. “We’ll double back, and enter their search pattern. We’d be lost in the search. They’d think we are one of them. If we maintain

our course, we'd look suspicious, and be intercepted.” He looked down at his lap while rubbing his chin with a clawed forefinger. He turned to look at me. “It's the best I can think of for now. We'll try to not look suspicious until I think of a better idea.”

This didn't lessen my fear, much. “I don't know.” I said as I thought about what little I knew about space navigation. “In normal space, we'd be vulnerable to attack, but would be able to hide easily. At least in hyperspace, we'd be safe from surprise attacks since an attacker would have to use its wake to drop us into normal space.” I said this more to try to assure myself that things would be okay, but it wasn't working. The stress was getting to me. The past hour or so has been a roller coaster, with me feeling safe one moment, then feeling in mortal danger the next. I wanted to find a way to let my mind wander, maybe even try to sleep, and let whatever might befall us, happen. I got to my feet and resignedly said, “Do what you can to evade the search. I have no choice, but to trust you. I can't see us outrunning, or evading, a *Super Morningstar* in this old crate. I'm going to one of the crew quarters to try to get some sleep or at least try to relax. If we're dropped from hyperspace, I order you to vent the ship's atmosphere into space. I'm not about to get captured again, even if it's brief and messy.” I walked to the transporter alcove, and retrieved my blanket, then headed for the door on the port side of the alcove. It slid open, revealing a corridor that resembled the starboard one. To my right, was an open door, leading into a dark sleeping quarters that was a mirror image of the Zephenidian's room. I turned back towards the door to the bridge, and said, “By the way, thank you. You're not a stupid mutt, after all.”

The Zephenidian turned to look at me, and I noticed that the fur under his eyes seemed to be wet and slightly matted. There was a deep sense of regret emanating from him, but there was more. It felt like a lot of conflict, possibly from his entire world view having been shattered. I thought I saw him crack a slight smile, though I was unsure about Zephenidian facial expressions. Stepping into the bedroom, I set the blaster down on the computer terminal desk, then crawled onto the shelf-like bed, and wrapped the hide blanket around myself. I watched the eddies and streamers which rushed past the room's viewport for a moment, then tried to relax. My gaze focused on the subdued colors reflecting from the walls and ceiling. Though I was tired, sleep would not come, due to the stress and emotional turmoil pouring through my brain. Hours passed, as I thought about my friends and family back home. Years ago, they probably

held my funeral. I thought about how my brother might have read the eulogy, while my mom and dad would have wept. The coffin would be empty, since the body would have been lost over a thousand light years away. What would my family think if I was to show up unexpectedly? With dozens of ships searching for us, my hope of returning home was not much greater than it was when I was confined to that filthy room on that planet. At least the hyperdrive hum remained steady suggesting that the plan was still going well.

* * * *

The blast threw me from the bed, onto the floor, as alarms screamed. “Attention all crew and passengers!” blared an authoritative male voice from the ship's intercom. “There is nothing to worry about, just hyperspatial turbulence.” The floor lurched and heaved again, and everything seemed to spin. I struggled to my feet, and gripped the handrail of the lower bunk as the ship heaved again. The voice continued, “All crew and passengers report to the armory! I repeat, all crew and passengers report to the armory!” The floor lurched violently again, then the floor steadied. “We have been dropped from hyperspace.”

My heart was pounding as I continued to grip the handrail of the bunk. *This isn't happening*, I thought as I noticed my knuckles turning white from my grip.

The intercom clicked back to life. “All passengers and crew, brace for impact. We got incoming. Everyone to the Amory. Shields! Why aren't the shields up. Raise the fucking shields! Oh shi-” The intercom hissed and the sound of a huge crash assaulted my ears. The floor heaved one last time, before steadying, and the room was plunged into darkness. The alarms continued to blare as the dim red emergency lights flickered on.

I touched the panel next to the door, which flashed green, as the door slid aside. The corridor was lit by spinning red and amber emergency lights, which swept shafts of light through the gloom. A short-haired blond woman, wearing a T-shirt and jeans, ran down the corridor, then stopped abruptly. She looked at me and quickly said, “You, your, ah, the armory is this way. It's Zephs, it's fucking Zephs!” As she resumed her run, I followed, just as I caught the blue-green sparkle of a hunter party transporting in, just outside my cabin.

Near panic welled inside me. “No, fuck no!” I screamed.

“They blew up the bridge!” she shouted as she ran ahead of me. At the intersection, she

bolted right. Ahead, I saw Three guards at an open locker at a T intersection, handing blasters to several passengers, and a few uniformed crew.

“Get your asses over here!” shouted the guard, before a spear of blue-hot plasma lanced past me and blasted a flaming hole in his chest.”

“Down, down!” yelled two of the other guards as another shaft of plasma destroyed the woman's knee, causing her to flail onto the deck, screaming. Looking back, a pack of about six bipedal wolf-aliens entered the intersection, and were firing. I dove to the floor, as a blast passed so close, I could feel the heat and smell the ozone. I slid, and attempted to roll, as another group of Zephenidians rounded a corner at the far end of the corridor beyond the armory. The surviving guard slid a small blaster across the floor towards me, as he yelled, “Don't surrender, fight! They *will* kill you! Fight to the death!”

I took the weapon in my hand, as the guard, and the remaining crew members began to return fire at the two groups of Zephenidians on either side of them. Two of them were hit, and had fallen as I fumbled with my weapon. For a moment, I feared I was surrounded, before I noticed the nearby side passage across from the open weapons' locker. I got to my feet, narrowly dodging both hostile and friendly fire, before charging down the passageway.

* * * *

A harsh “*Vashkuuff!*” jolted me from my nightmare, and I realized that I had fallen asleep. I turned and saw the Zephenidian at the doorway.

“Oh, it's you.” I said, relieved, but also concerned that something may have gone wrong. “So what's the bad news. Are you waking me up, so I can be conscious when you vent the air.”

The Zephenidian walked towards the bed. I was nervous, but tried to remain calm as he stood over me. He reached down with both hands and gently grasped my forearms, then he stared down at me.

I shuddered and tried to avoid his gaze as I asked, “What are you doing? You aren't going to, ah, do anything to me.”

The Zephenidian sniffed the air. “You stink.” He continued gazing down at me for a moment before speaking. “I have to restrain you until you hear what I have to say, because I don't want you to act rash and possibly harm yourself.”

That could only mean that the news was not merely bad, but terrible. “Okay,” I said, as I tried to relax, fearing what he had to say.

“I’m sorry, *Vashkuuff*,” he said as he made eye contact. He pushed me harder against the bed. “They found us, and I had to break formation. We’re fleeing again. My plan failed. They found the bodies and our identity was logged and tracked. And yes, they’re gaining on us.”

I tried to fight his restraint. “Blow the fucking airlock seals! Shut down the hyperdrive field! Set charges! Just...” I continued to fight against him, but he held me fast against the bed. “Kill us! I don’t want to go back.” I screamed and tried to break free of his grip.

“Calm down or I’ll bite you.” he snarled as he pushed me harder against the bed and clicked his jaws together twice. “Listen to me. I won’t let them take you. I won’t let them take *us*. We’ll die first, but we must try to fight.”

“God fucking dammit!” I cried. I tried to regain my composure, though I was still shaking. “I dreamed about being captured again. The ship I was on, it was getting attacked.” I cried. “So many people. I saw so many people die. What’s the plan? Please have a plan.” I was nearly sobbing.

“I don’t know.” he said as he slowly released his grip on my arms. “I’m going to let you get up now, but please remain calm. Keep in mind, I’m far stronger than you, and if I have to subdue you again, I will. We may have to engage them.”

I slowly sat up on the bed, still shaking, and looked at the Zephenidian. “You mean, ah, in battle?” One small ship battling an entire fleet. Would sound heroic to some, but sounded stupid to me. “Not much of a plan.” I said with a sigh. “They’ll probably find a way to transport me to their ship.”

“I won’t let that happen.” The Zephenidian grasped my arm in his large hand, his claws pressed firmly against my skin, and he gently tugged me towards the door. “We don’t have much time.”

I left the bed and followed the wolf back to the bridge. I wiped the tears from my eyes and fought to regain some mental fortitude. I asked, “How many ships?”

The Zephenidian knelt on the floor in front of the transporter alcove and began working at a stubborn latch. “Three ships. Two small, one large. Likely a pair of *Kha’Szhyks* and a *Kha’Hurakh*, or *Hyk’Tashuk*.”

I knew that this meant a pair of *KillSlays* similar to the ship I was currently on, and a *KillerDeath* or *Morningstar*. This would be an impossible engagement to be sure. “What about the other ships, wasn't the whole Hunter Fleet dispatched?”

The Zephenidian worked the latch loose, and the floor of the transporter alcove lifted up revealing a hatchway. “Most of the other ships were allowed to resume their normal duties, though a few others are on their way as backup.” He turned and lowered himself feet-first into the accessway, and his feet reached the bottom while he was only in about as far as his chest. The Zephenidian ducked into the crawlspace.

I approached the hatch and peered down. There was two rungs leading to the bottom which was less than five feet down. It was fairly dark, though I could make out three thick conduits, many access panels, and a spaghetti of wires and cables. Warmth emanated from the hatchway, accompanied by a dull osculating thrum of the ship's hyperdrive. The Zephenidian crawled back into view, and got to his feet. I stepped back to give him room to climb out. “So what's going on?” I asked.

The Zephenidian began to lower the alcove's floor. “Our weapons and shields appear to be fully operational and have recently been upgraded. We have twenty mini plasma torpedoes in stock.” He engaged the latch to secure the alcove's floor in place. He turned back to me and slowly reached his hand under my chin and gently ran his claws along my skin. “You are,” he paused, and thought for a moment. “Daw, Daw?”

“Don” I nervously said as I felt his claws gently kneading against my chin and neck.

“Daw'in” he tried. “Daw, Daw in.”

When trying to share names across species, one often has to compromise. Names were routinely butchered, often in unique and sometimes amusing ways. I thought for a moment, then said, “Daw'in is okay.”

“Daw'in” he said as he lightly poked under my chin with the claw of his index digit. He took my hand in his, and drew it towards his own chin. I felt the thick fur under his muzzle with my fingers. As he held my hand against his chin, he said something which sounded a bit like, “Voshkha”

I repeated “Voshkha” but knew I didn't get the bark quite right. Then I asked, “Can I call you 'Vosh?’”

“That's acceptable,” said Voshkha as he released my hand from his, and hurried to the right seat of the cockpit, and peered into a scope. “It's almost time, Daw'in. Take your seat.”

I sat down in the seat and watched the tunnel of color on the screen, waiting for the end to come. “So what's next? What do you have planned.”

“Any moment,” said Voshkha as he made some adjustments to his console. “I'm changing course to an uninhabited star system. The system has four planets, plus a sub-stellar object, orbiting a small main sequence star.” He paused for a moment apparently checking some data on a screen. “Three of the planets are gas giants. The sub-stellar object has 15 significant satellites and a vast ring system.”

Voshkha made a few course corrections as anticipation grew. I gripped the sides of my seat, waiting for the final confrontation which would likely cause my demise. The minutes seemed to drag on, as my heart began to pound.

Voshkha turned to me and asked, “You mentioned having dreams about being captured. How often do you have them?”

“Every time I go to sleep,” I answered. “It's every single night. Every single time I try to catch a nap, and it happens. It's like my brain thinks, by dreaming this, that it can somehow change the past. But the dreams rarely vary. It's almost always verbatim. Everything I see, everything I hear, every conversation I have. Always the same, from when I fall out of my bed when we hit the hyperspatial wake, to getting zapped by the stunner which finally brought me down. It's like my mind wants to go back in time and fix it, but it can't.” I started sobbing. “I, I, I mean. I can't even change the dream. It's always the same.”

“It's stress induced,” said Voshkha as he stared down into his lap. “I damaged your mind. I damaged your brain.” He turned to me and rested his left hand on my shoulder. “You can't change your past. I can't change your past. I cannot change what I've done to you.” He paused for a moment, seemingly lost in thought. “I can't change your past, but I intend to grant you your future.”

A rapid blipping tone sounded from the console. I asked, “Ah, what's happening, Vosh?”

Voshkha removed his hand from my shoulder, and turned to his console. He appeared to be deep in concentration and he didn't answer me for almost a minute. He reached for the control column and began making another course correction. He turned back to me abruptly and

said, “Daw'in, watch the viewport. Few ever get to see this.”

“What I'm I watching for?” I asked as I watched the view. The mists continued to flow in a broken tunnel of color. As far as I could tell, everything seemed to be normal. “I don't see anyth-” A wall of shimmering emerald suddenly loomed on the viewport. “Holy fuck! Wha-”

The ship lurched and shook as the Zephenidian frantically worked the controls. “It's the hyperspatial wake from one of the small ships. I'm trying to steer us directly into the wakes to minimize impact. Brace yourself.”

Another shimmering wall loomed on the viewport and the ship lurched hard, followed immediately by second wall. The ship lurched even harder and it felt like it was going into a spin as Voshkha fought with the controls. “The gravity systems are having trouble compensating for this.” After a few moments of fighting with the controls, he said, “The small ships are crisscrossing ahead of us. Hold on!” A single large wall of energy filled the screen and the ship bucked hard. “We're dropping, attempting to bring us into a controlled exit. I'm going to try to make our exit as close to the sub-stellar object as I dare to.”

The ship lurched, and a green flash filled the viewport. Stars appeared, though still accompanied by the tunnel of mist. Voshkha began drawing the throttle forward, as the hyperdrive whined in protest. He gripped the control column, causing the view to pan, until a large planet loomed into view. The mist partially and intermittently obscured the planet, but it wasn't too difficult to make out. It looked a bit like a rust-red version of Saturn though with more turbulent banding, with a ring system which made Saturn's rings seem tiny and simple in comparison. The night-side of the planet revealed an angry sea of red-hot hell broiling from the planet's guts. The inner edge of the rings appeared to glow a deep blood red, from light radiating from the planet's furnace, as well as from the system's tiny red sun. I had never been this close to a brown dwarf, and the pictures I've seen did not do it justice.

“Two *Kha'Szhyk* class vessels are dropping out of hyperspace on a parallel course to ours.” said Voshkha. “Trying to dump velocity before exiting borderspace and before we get too close to that thing. Attempting an emergency braking maneuver.” The Zephenidian pushed the throttle all the way forward, causing the ship to lurch hard. The engines sounded like they were screaming in agony, and the ship began to shake violently. I was afraid that the ship was going to tear itself apart as it continued to be jostled by forces from the very edge of the universe. The

whine slowly fell in pitch, and the shaking began to slow and subside. Voshkha pulled the switch above the throttle, causing the viewport to flash green again, and the mists were gone. The planet now completely filled the view, with the plane of the rings stretching out along the bottom of the view. Voshkha slowly drew back the throttle about half-way, then turned to me and asked, “Ever pilot a ship?”

I thought Voshkha was joking, but I decided to answer him seriously. “No, why do you ask?”

“This ship is meant to have a crew of at least two,” he said as he eyed me intently. “One to fire the weapons, the other to maneuver. Ideally three, someone to work in the engine room to keep the ship from falling apart.”

I stammered a bit as I realized that he was in fact serious. “I, I, I've never. I've never operated a ship. I've never even operated an aircraft. And...” I thought for a moment, “I can't read your language, so I can't use your instruments. I'm useless.”

Voshkha stood up and said, “Move to the pilot's seat, I need to bring the weapons and defenses online. Hurry, they are about to emerge from borderspace.”

I moved over to the right-hand seat. As Voshkha began to sit down next to me, I surveyed the console. I knew that the throttle controlled both the sublight engines and the hyperdrive, and that the switch above the throttle controlled which system the throttle operated. In the middle of the console was a control column about the right size and shape for a Zephenidian to grip in his or her hand like a joystick. There was a scope mounted to the right side of the console which was angled towards me. Then there was the multitude of buttons and display screens all of which made little sense to me.

Voshkha grasped my left hand and brought it to the control column. “This is your most important control. Push up to angle the ship down, pull back to angle the ship up. Left and right angles the ship in their opposite directions. I will handle the buttons next to the column since they're rather technical. These buttons control whether the ship's inertial controls are computer controlled, or set to manual, and to which target they're set relative to.”

“Okay,” I said as the controls seemed a bit less mysterious, though I was still far from confident in my piloting ability. “Just tell me what I need to do.” I felt the control column in my hands though I didn't dare to move it just yet. I definitely felt that I was way out of my element.

I looked down at the throttle to my left. “And the throttle between us?”

“Don't worry about this.” he said, though after a pause, he said, “The throttle controls the engines. The switch above the throttle controls whether the throttle is controlling the sublight engines, or the hyperdrive.” He made frantic adjustments to his console. “Just concentrate on the control column and follow my directions. The two small ships have exited borderspace. The larger ship is exiting hyperspace ahead of us.” There was a bright green flash, which turned into a faint bluish streak just above the plane of the planet's rings. “It's a *Kha'Hurakh* class ship.”

All I could think was, *checkmate*, as the three ships began to converge on us. The larger ship would still be out of the picture for several minutes as it had to remain in borderspace to dump velocity and attempt to match relative speed with us. I still gripped the control column with my right hand while trying to will myself to be comfortable flying an alien vessel into combat. I slowly rocked the control column forward and back, watching the view tilt down and up, before moving it to the sides. The view panned responsively with the control. I saw that the column could be rotated, so I turned it a few degrees to the right, and watched as the view began to roll starboard. “Oh, I can do rolls too.” I said.

Voshkha glanced at one of his monitors. “Time for a preemptive strike on the starboard *Kha'Szhyk* ship. Bring us around, hard right, slightly down.” I slowly moved the column slightly up and to the left, as Voshkha reached his hand to mine to guide me. “I don't know how our degrees would translate to yours, and we don't have the luxury of time to set up a common frame of reference.” The planet and stars panned to the left as the ship responded to the controls. He released my hand and continued, “Okay, that dot in the middle of the screen is our target. It's an older ship than mine, and as far as I can tell, has weaker shields.” Voshkha adjusted his controls and peered at some displays. “The larger ship is down to twenty-five percent light speed and is turning to intercept us.”

“What do I do?” I asked as I continued to hold the control.

“Keep steady,” said Voshkha. “The larger ship is at eighteen percent light. I think they're going to try to emerge so they'll be in weapons range.” Voshkha paused for a moment as he checked his instruments again. “Follow any directions I give you.” The small point on the viewport began to resolve itself into a slightly elongated dot. “The large ship is port of us, and is now at ten percent light speed.” He worked the controls, causing a slight whirl and click to sound

from beneath the floor. “Torpedo loaded and armed. Opening fire on the small ship now.”

There was a slight electrical-sounding pop from beneath the floor, followed by another whir and click, then another pop, which repeated a third time. Several bright blue-white balls of plasma raced from the bottom of the viewport towards the speck, followed by a spray of yellow-orange blasts, which converged on the target. The speck spat it's own blue-hot ordinance, which raced towards us.

“Evasive!” shouted Voshkha.

I pulled the column hard to the left, and the view panned hard starboard. The view flashed, and the ship lurched hard. The viewport was hazy with clouds of plasma, which began to disperse. I moved the column to the right, causing the view to pan back towards the target. Several more bolts raced from the bottom of the screen, two of which connected with the small ship, producing a flare-like explosion. The enemy vessel began to spin as it emitted a trail of plasma, smoke, and debris.

Voshkha was preoccupied as he studied the displays on his console. “Our target sustained a severe hull breach, and a ruptured fuel tank. They're disabled. We sustained a minor hit on our forward shield with only a minor plasma load, which has already dispersed.”

It was far too soon to gloat in victory, since there was a second ship similar to the one we had disabled, along with a full-sized combat vessel, which we had no chance against. “I guess we did okay against the first ship,” I said. “What about the other two?”

The Zephenidian looked into his scanner scope. “The other *Kha'Szhyk* class ship is behind us. The large *Kha'Hurakh* vessel has exited borderspace and is arming weapons. They're attempting to flank us.”

Still gripping the control column, I pushed it hard to the right, and down, causing the view to pan. The large fiery ringed sphere loomed into the view. I centered my view on the plane of the ring system. A tiny triangular metallic object was visible just above the rings, and seemed to be rapidly approaching.

Voshkha pointed to the object. “This is a *Kha'Hurakh* class vessel. I would suggest that we do not get too close. Its weapons would easily rip through our shields and hull. It's best to try to run.”

Desperation was weighing heavily on me, and I felt that I needed to do something brash,

something which would throw off the enemies. “What about the planet? If we get past them, can't we play cat and mouse in the rings?”

Voshkha adjusted some controls and peered at a display. “Getting past that ship might be difficult, and, piloting through a debris field is rather advanced, even for me. The planet also has a very strong magnetic field, which means we're going to be hit by streams of charged particles. I'm having trouble determining how severe the radiation would be, and its effects on us.” As he spoke, I eyed the throttle and the switch from the corner of my eye. “The magnetic field and charged particles may cause our scanners or computer to malfunction.”

Without giving Voshkha any warning, I flicked the switch above the throttle, then pulled the throttle all the way back. The viewpoint flashed green, and the ship lurched hard, and began to shudder violently, as the hyperdrive rumbled and whined. Voshkha protested. “Stupid *chuthnu*, what are you doing?” The hyperdrive whined loudly as the mists began to sweep by. The triangular object vanished almost instantly off the side of the viewport. The brown dwarf appeared now, as a series of rust-colored banded clouds, with red-hot glowing hell between them. I slowly moved the control column up, tilting the view down towards the rings. At this range, the rings appeared as a pale red-orange finely grooved phonograph record. The mists of borderspace continued to rush past as the groves began to expand. “Chuthnu! Daw'in, decelerate and bring us back to normal, now!”

I slowly drew the throttle forward, as I complied. “I got us past that other ship,” I said, “And I think I'll be able to drop us close to the rings.”

Voshkha got to his feet and gently pulled me from my seat, before sitting down in the pilot's seat. “Daw'in, you are too rash for your own good.” He began to work the controls. “Sit down and don't move.” As I sat down in the left seat, he turned to me and said, “Our hyperdrive is almost fully discharged, and it will have to be charged for a while before we can hope to enter hyperspace again. There's barely enough power for a close range transfer.” The view flashed, and the mists vanished. The rings now appeared as swarms of rocks and pebbles, all orbiting in orderly streams.

An alarm sounded as a series of loud harsh buzzes. I asked, “What's that?”

Voshkha pressed a few buttons which silenced the alarm. “Radiation is affecting our systems. Transfer damper and scanners are behaving erratically. As far as exposure, we'll be

fine as long as we don't spend more than a day here.” The rocky debris began to take on the identity of pockmarked boulders. “Both ships entered borderspace briefly, to pursue, and are exiting now. They're on an intercept course. I'm sorry. Maybe you're right. We can't engage them, but we have to buy time. Maybe act rash at times to throw them off.”

“Buying time?” I asked. “Buying time for what? Do you have any allies which are going to bail us out?”

Voshkha rested his left hand on my shoulder, while he made fine course adjustments with his right hand on the control column. “I doubt it.” he said. “I guess I'm just hoping someone would come to their senses.”

Several ideas fought for supremacy in my head, and all of them were brash, and probably suicidal at best. I tried to make sense of it all, and fought for words as I spoke to Voshkha. “I got a,” I fought for words. “A fucked up request or suggestion.”

“Okay, Daw'in.” said the Zephenidian. The rocks swooped across the viewport as the ship slipped through the plane of the ring. The Zephenidian glanced at me, but turned back to the controls, since the debris field had him occupied. After a long pause, he said, “You...you're planning on sacrificing yourself somehow. I will not allow this. This would make our entire reason for being here irrelevant.”

I protested, “You suggested we needed to buy time, hoping they'll come to their senses. I have an idea which may make them come to their senses a lot faster.”

“What is your plan?” asked Voshkha.

“Can you, ah, transport me onto the bridge of their main ship somehow?”

The ship lurched, and the lights flickered. Voshkha peered at the scanner. “The larger ship is closing and is attempting to engage us. Maneuvering now.” The view panned upwards, revealing the floating avalanche of rocks. “Bringing us back into the debris field.” The ship shook again, and the view became slightly hazy as plasma from the incoming weapons fire interacted with the ship's shields. Voshkha said, “The ship has shields plus a transfer damper. Transfer would be impossible.”

“But you said the radiation caused the dampers to act intermittently.”

“Intermittent, yes,” said Voshkha. “It will be difficult to time it just right. With how low our hyperdrive's power reserves are, any mistake, and you could be lost in transit.” The ship

lurched hard, and the lights dimmed briefly. The view on the viewport was briefly obliterated by a whitish glow, which began to slowly dissipate. Voshkha growled, "Direct hit on our aft shield. Serious plasma overload. It probably would have gone through our shields, but the planet's magnetic field and radiation has partially depolarized the torpedo's containment system." He made a quick course adjustment as another flare-like torpedo sailed into view from the top of the screen. "Daw'in, this will be a one-way trip. I won't be able to transfer you back until the hyperdrive charges, and by that time, not only would you be dead, but they'd probably be done picking your sinew from their teeth."

"I need your Mindlink translator." I got out of my seat and leaped into the transport alcove. A plan of sorts did form in my mind as I mentally braced myself for what would probably turn into a suicide mission. I pushed both hands against the opposite walls of the alcove, as the vague plan of posing as some experimental Human which had gone a bit wrong formed in my head. I stammered again, before finally asking, "Ah, what is your people's ah, clandestine black-ops organization called? Do you have some kind of agency which does covert shit which is not completely answerable to your government, *Establishment*, or something like that?"

Voshkha stared at me appearing almost in shock. "This is a stupid plan. The *Establishment* isn't even accountable for itself really, but I think I know what you mean." The ship shook hard, and felt like it was listing to port before it steadied. "*Chuthnu*, you stupid shit, I hate you!" Voshkha shouted before pulling off his translator headband. He charged from his seat to the alcove, and placed the headband around my head, and tried as well as he could to align the Mindlink to my frontal lobes. The band didn't fit my head well, and I had to hold the Mindlink array in place with my free hand. The Zephenidian unfastened the translator's control box from his arm and, fastened it around my forearm. Once he finished, he said, "Can you understand me again."

"Yes," I said as I readied myself in the alcove. I took my hand off the headband, and felt that the Mindlink was stable enough to not slip off unless I made a sudden move.

"You give me no choice. It's a stupid plan, but this is all we have. The Cult of Kha'chu'ahk? No, they're criminals and terrorists, more than anything. Prukak's Claw? Yes, the organization is called *Prukak's Claw*, and they don't answer to anyone." said Voshkha as he stood

to the right of the alcove, working a small control panel. “Only the most elite members of the *Establishment of Prukak* become members of this group, and yes, they've been known to do horrifying experiments.” After a pause as he adjusted the controls, he continued. “The bridge is cramped. I will have to use as tight of a field as possible. This may also give us a little margin as far as power usage.” The ship shook violently and the lights dimmed again, before they returned. “Stand as close to the center, draw in your arms as close to your body as possible, and crouch.”

I positioned myself to the center of the disk, and couched down on all fours. “I'm ready.”

“If you die in transit, it will be due to power loss, and it would be instant as you contact the hyperspatial medium.” said Voshkha. “If you survive the transfer, you'll likely have a far less pleasant death in the hands of the crew.” After a long pause while peering at a small screen, he said, “Waiting for a window.”

I held my breath as I waited. I assumed that the debris of the ring was making it difficult for the other ships to get clear shots, though the last few had likely caused some damage. It was difficult for me to mentally prepare for what could be my death.

“Their transfer damper is fluctuating,” said Voshkha. “Locking on and engaging system.”

I held my breath as the hum and buzz of the transport began. The field formed, and the bands of energy formed and diverged. I held still and watched my former owner and his ship dissolve. The rings began to converge as a cramped control room took shape. The transport field suddenly began to waver uncertainly, as the rings slowed. After a moment, the field stabilized, and the rings resumed their motion. The hum faded along with the field.

I was crouched on the cramped bridge of the *Kha'Hurakh* class vessel. I cautiously stood while being watchful of the nearby overhead console. This was more of a proper bridge than Voshkha's ship, with five stations, all occupied by Zephenidians. The middle station was obviously for the captain, or *Hhrff*, who stood next to his seat, glaring at me. The others were leaving their seats to turn toward me as well. One of them who sat at the console nearest to the view screen, yelled, “*Chuthnu* with a translator!”

I yelled, “Yes, and you are all contaminated!”

The *Hhrff* spun around eying his bridge crew. “Did any of you bring a gun. Shoot this abomination!”

“Yes, I'm sentient,” I said. “I was created by *Prukak's Claw* as a weapon to use against the Federation. You foolishly interfered with a *Prukak's Claw* Operation.”

The *Hhrff* looked at his crew, then said, “Anyone! Tear this *Chuthnu* apart.”

“It's too late for you,” I said as I worked out my rouse. “A translator transmitted brain virus. You all got mere hours before you all become mindless vegetables.”

One of the crew members who manned a station with a blue holographic globe, spoke to the *Hhrff*. “Another ship is about to drop out of hyperspace.”

The *Hhrff* mumbled, “It's our backup. They finally arrived to dispose of this plague.”

The crew member at the globe-station seemed a bit less optimistic, “I don't think it's our backup. They're moving too fast.”

The *Hhrff* growled, “Is the ship *Prukak Claw*? They'll probably destroy us to protect their secrets.”

“They're too fast to be any of ours,” said the Zephenidian at the scanner globe station. “Unless they possess alien technology.”

The largest Zephenidian on the bridge said, “Okay, *Hhrff*, I'll handle the trash. I think it's a trick. I don't think this is a true *chuthnu*. I'll kill it, and we'll dispose of it, and pretend this incident never happened. We'll quarantine our ship for a few days in case this is not a trick.” The large Zephenidian slowly approached me. “So if you are a *Prukak's Claw* experiment, where were you bound for?”

I tried to block out any attempt of his trying to probe my mind as I quickly improvised. “I was bound for the Hosh'Narkh system near the Federation Border. Ah, don't try to find it on your charts. It's official designation is just some string of letters and numbers. It's a secret outpost on a small planet, orbiting a tiny flare-star.”

The Zephenidian standing next to the scanner globe console spoke, “The unknown ship is exiting hyperspace!”

An orange-pink flash lit the viewport, and a strange saucer-shaped vessel streaked into the distance, before circling back, then exited borderspace with another flash of color.”

The *Hhrff* visually identified the ship on the screen. “Niquentorians. Incoming Niquentorian vessel on an intercept course.”

The Zephenidian who was apparently the communications officer sat down at its console

and pressed a few buttons. “They're hailing us!”

The language which came out of the communications' system was Zephenidian, but the voice sounded artificial and robotic. After a few moments, the *Hhrff* spoke to the communications officer, “Tell the Niquentorians that if they make any provocative move, we'll kill the *chuthnu*.” He wheeled around, and yelled, “Someone, get a weapon so we can properly,” he paused, and locked his gaze on me. “You think I'm stupid.” he growled. “I don't know what you are, but I'll soon find out.” He lunged at me, hands out, teeth bared, as he snarled with rage.

Something threw him back, causing his head to crack loudly against an overhead panel. A rising ear-splitting whine sounded in my ears, as I saw spindles of orange forming and spinning about me. There was a wave of vertigo as the Zephenidians, and the bridge of their ship dissolved into green and gold sparkles. The alcove sparkled and shimmered into view, with Voshkha staring in apparent shock while holding his hands over his ears. The spindles shrank away, and the loud screaming whine of the alien transporter faded.

As I stepped from the alcove, somewhat dazed, Voshkha slowly removed his hands from his ears while staring at me, open-mouthed. He slowly closed his mouth, then said, “I thought the Niquentorians were joking when they said you were still alive. What happened?”

“Not sure,” I said as I pondered what transpired on the bridge of the Zephenidian vessel. “I don't think they completely believed me.” I looked at the viewport and there was an image overlaid on it. The image was a creature with a large reddish-brown head covered with folds of flesh, with large almond shaped eyes, a flat nose with slits for nostrils, and a large mouth with tiny pointed teeth. The creature was speaking, but the sound through the comm system was a synthetic-sounding version of Zephenidian. After a few moments, there was a click, and the language switched to English, though the voice had a similar robotic quality to it. “Human, I have spoken to your 'owner' and we release you into his custody. We are ordering the Zephenidian Hunter Fleet to stand down.”

I looked back to Voshkha. “Is this two-way? Can I talk to the Niquentorian?”

“Yes,” said Voshkha, “The comm system is open.”

I approached the cockpit, then sat down in the left seat. “Thank you,” I said. “I,” I stammered, “I'm-,”

“That was a foolish thing you did, Human,” said the Niquentorian. “But it bought you

time.” The interior of the alien's ship was dim, the lighting was mostly shades of red, with the air appearing slightly murky. As the view panned to the left, near a large semi-circular platform, four filthy Humans staggered around on the floor, appearing groggy, or half sedated. One of them tried to get to his feet using a large free standing console, but slumped back down onto the floor again. The Human got to his knees, turned to the screen, and spoke, “I, I, I think I saw you. I forgive you.” His voice stuttered, and his speech was slurred, like he was drugged or drunk.

“Forgive me for what,” I asked.

“Lana,” He shook his head, like he was trying to clear cobwebs. “Fuck this shit the Niquentorians call air. I, I think I... Too much pressure, too much nitrogen.”

“Lana?” I asked. It was then, when I thought about that woman who I had tried to have sex with in the enclosure. The man, even the others, looked vaguely familiar. “You, you are the ones from the enclosure on the beach?”

“Lana meant a lot to me,” he said as he struggled with his slurred speech. “If only they came sooner.”

I felt a deep remorse for what happened, and some responsibility. “I'm sorry. Wish I could help.”

“I was told that your Zeph turned nice.” He paused for a moment to catch his breath. “It will take us about five days, and we'll probably be dropped off at Alchoa or Talzyon, maybe P'Zarkus. I'd rather it take several times longer and have normal air to breathe, and actual food to eat. We can't even eat Niq food, because some of their nutrients are wrong.”

The view shook slightly and a muffled explosion sounded. The view panned back to the Niquentorian who spoke through the synthetic sounding translator, “We're under attack.” The alien reached for a button, causing the overlaid image to vanish. The deep orange edge of the brown dwarf filled most of the screen. A large wedge shaped vessel with twin engine pods beneath it, was bearing down on a small vessel which looked like a flattened sphere, with a pinkish-orange glow around the equator. Orange-yellow beams were lancing from the larger ship, followed by a volley of blue-white bolts. The weapons exploded around the smaller Niquentorian ship, though it appeared unscathed. The smaller vessel emitted a blue-violet beam across the larger ship's bow, which swept through the target, causing the hull it contacted to blaze a blinding violet-white, before shrinking away. The larger ship began to fall apart, having been

bisected lengthwise, as blasts of internal atmosphere and fuel pushed the pieces of wreckage further apart. The fog glowed orangery-blue in the light of the brown dwarf and the small red star it orbited, as it vented from the twin sections of the ship's wreckage.

The alien's image re-appeared on the viewport and began to speak Zephenidian for a few moments, before resuming in English, "I apologize for the show of force. I have transmitted the visual data to the rest of the Hunter Fleet as a warning, as well as informing them to recover survivors from the wreckage."

I thought for a moment about the Humans' food problem and that Voshkha mentioned having a surplus of dry rations. I turned to Voshkha, "Could we spare some of our rations? The Humans have no food for their trip home."

Voshkha looked at me, and thought for a moment. "My assessment of our food stocks was based on my not being alive, but we probably could spare some."

The Niquentorian spoke, its shipboard translator translating it into synthetic English and Zephenidian at the same time. "That is a generous offer, and we offer our thanks, however this is unnecessary. There is more than enough food in and around the wreckage for us to salvage. Use your food to ensure a safe and comfortable trip home."

"Thank you for your help," I said to the Niquentorian captain. "I'm really glad you showed up when you did."

"You have a long journey ahead of you," said the Niquentorian. "We won't escort you, but will monitor the situation and offer assistance if needed."

Voshkha sat down beside me and checked his displays. "Daw'in, the remainder of the fleet has been called off. Even the remaining *Kha'Szhyk* vessel has entered borderspace."

I leaned back in the seat and felt all the weight having been lifted off of me. "Vosh, how soon can we get underway?"

"It will still be awhile before the hyperdrive fully charges," said Voshkha as he reached a hand under my chin, and slowly tilted my head up.

There was something about this kind of physical contact which both made me uneasy, but at the same time, curiosity kept me from recoiling or pushing Voshkha away. I asked, "What was I to you, back on the planet? Pet? Livestock? Lab experiment?"

Voshkha leaned towards me, fixing his gaze on me, while still gently holding my chin.

“You were not what you should have been, Daw'in. We're not allowed to keep or treat *chuthnu* as actual pets. You would have been treated much better had you been treated as such. Livestock, experiment... I'm so sorry.” Voshkha placed his right hand on my left shoulder and leaned closer, his slightly moist nose brushing lightly against mine, his warm breath against my face. The scent was a light canine musk and was not unpleasant, though I wasn't used to being this close to a member of a different species. I shivered out of nervousness, but did not resist. After a moment with our noses together, he slid his slick tongue across my lips, before slowly releasing his hand from my shoulder. He still held his hand under my chin as he continued, “You're a friend. Once the hyperdrive is fully charged, I'll take you home.” He slowly released my chin and returned to his seat.

I started to bring my hand to my mouth to wipe off the streak of Zephenidian saliva, but thought that this could be seen as impolite. “So what's going to happen?” I asked. “You know, when you get me home?”

Voshkha said, “I haven't thought of that. My original plan was not to survive the trip. Now, I don't know.” He was deep in thought before asking, “If I have to die, I will. I'm sure many of your species would be happy to kill me.”

Voshkha was somewhat correct. Zephenidians who fled Zephenidian society were often ill-treated by Humans. Some have been killed. Many have been forced to relocate to planets with lower Human populations, usually worlds closer to the Lutrian home world. “The Lutrians, ah, Chakharans, can offer you asylum and safety.” I said. “They're not as revenge-minded as my species. Even some members of my own species can show a lot of tolerance and compassion.”

“So you would.” said Voshkha, “Help me apply for any asylum or refugee status?”

“Yes,” I said. “Anything to help a friend.”

“What about you?” asked Voshkha. “What will you do when you get home.”

I hadn't given that much thought. I thought about my family and the reunion which would likely take place. “Reunite with family, I suppose. Probably freak them out since they probably already held my funeral.”

“That's ah, a bit morbid,” said Voshkha as he turned to face me again. “Though I was responsible for this. Me and my people, the *Establishment*. However, I was talking about after your family reunion.”

“I don't know,” I said. “Rebuild my life.” I thought for a moment, and turned to look at Voshkha. I slowly reached my hand to his shoulder, and ran my fingers through his fur, which was slightly oily and coarse, like the fur of a German Shepherd. He turned to face me, his eyes wide, his ears pricked forward. “I could use a pet. Ah, I mean a friend.”

Voshkha brought his face under my chin and nuzzled, before giving me a night nip on my neck. “Either would be fine.”

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The hyperdrive continued to charge for the next two hours. During that time, Voshkha took me to a small bathroom which was located in the central room between the two longitudinal corridors. The shower was barely a stall, and the water smelled old and stagnant, but it was better than nothing. I even took the opportunity to hack away at the mass of insect colony which was once my hair, and though the result was not pretty, it was no longer an itching mess. Once I was done cleaning the grime of years of captivity, I returned to the control room, and approached the cockpit. Voshkha turned, to me and sniffed the air. “A lot better,” before he tilted his head back and bared his neck to me.

I had bared my neck to him when I was a captive, as a way of showing my submission or compliance, for instance, when it would put the harness on me. Zephenidians often bare their neck to superior officers as a sign of submissiveness. This was often done as a presentation for the alpha or the *Hhrff*. I was unsure whether I was supposed to, or expected, to bite his neck, though from my own prior research, generally a neck bite is not considered routine. Once he lowered his head, I asked, “What's our status?”

“The hyperdrive is fully charged.” said the Zephenidian. “We're ready to go.”

I took my seat, as Voshkha flicked the switch and drew the throttle slowly back. The viewport flashed, and the ship lurched as the engines began to slowly rise in pitch. As the ship began to accelerate, I watched the mists rush by as I gave more thought about what I might do once I returned home. I decided that I would not go to Torresia, since the trip there had lead to my capture in the first place. If I did eventually travel there, or to any other outlying area, I'd make sure the ship I booked passage on, had a Wolf Hunter escort, and better yet, was also heavily armed. The first thing I'd do, would be to secure Voshkha's residency, well, that, along with contacting my family. Traveling might be an idea. I had thought about visiting

Kha'Shiveruk City on N'Gron III, the Federation capitol, or Chu'Li'kai IV, a planet with the Federation's largest university. There were so many options. I stretched out on the seat and said to myself, "My family can dismantle my grave. I'm coming home, back from the dead."