

# **THE GARRISON**

**Book One**

## **LOCKDOWN**

**By**

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## Chapter One

Zurin Five Penitentiary, Andromeda Galaxy, 3033 C.E.

Underground Level Six - The Garrison

“For the love of God, answer if you can hear me!” Rhonda’s growing alarm made her voice tremble. She felt cold sweat dripping down her spine.

In the cobalt glow of the circular control room, the monitors displayed empty offices. Where had the civilian employees gone? Why did no one answer the morning call? Had Rhonda made a mistake? She dreaded getting in trouble on her first solo watch.

Swallowing a clump in her throat, prison guard Rhonda Alendresis punched an emergency broadcast key on the central console. “Garrison calling all office personnel. Anyone up there at all?” Seconds ticked by and a chill crossed her spine. Still no response.

Something seemed very wrong near the surface, but the main computer didn’t detect any emergency. On the high-vaulted ceiling, the Artificial Intelligence that ran the facility hummed softly. Its concentric blue circles pulsed in a normal pattern. Rhonda addressed the A.I. “Skipper? What’s wrong in the upper levels?”

“All is as it should be, Miss Alendresis.” The cheery disembodied voice filled the room, coming from all directions. “Nothing to report.”

It didn’t make sense. If the A.I. didn’t detect any emergency, maybe she shouldn’t worry so much. New in the prison business, Rhonda wondered whether her fellow guards had concocted a sick joke to scare her. If they did, Rhonda would make them pay in the most devious way. She could be creative, too.

The bank of monitors displaying the deeper levels of the prison facility showed the inmates in their cells, some still asleep, others washing and eating breakfast as usual. All looked normal and secure down below.

But in the offices just above, nothing moved. Feverishly, Rhonda double-checked the cameras of all the civilian areas. Even the cafeteria and the gym looked devoid of life while they should effervesce with early morning activity.

Even if it was a prank, Rhonda couldn't take any chances. She hated to disturb the Captain, mainly to call for help. Reluctantly, she opened a channel to Captain Riggeur's personal quarters.

The Captain's face and smooth torso filled the screen. He shaved while watching a family hologram. Rhonda wondered about the toddler playing with a ship in the holoplay. She didn't know anything about Captain Riggeur's family, never thought he had one. In the background, she could hear a symphonic orchestra above the soft hum of his shaver. The Captain had good taste in music.

Riggeur stopped the holoplay and the picture of the child vanished. "Quiet," he ordered, and the music stopped. He turned off his shaver. "What is it, Rhonda?" His cerulean blue eyes transfixed her through the camera as if he could see right through her. How did he do that?

Trying not to feel foolish under his intense gaze, Rhonda composed herself. "Sorry to disturb you this early, Captain, but we may have an emergency!"

"May have? Make up your mind, Rhonda. Do we, or don't we?" He quickly combed back short blond hair.

Irritated by his patronizing attitude, Rhonda refrained a comment that might get her fired. Instead, she said, "The A.I. has nothing to report, but..."

"So, what could possibly be the emergency?" The light marble background of the bathroom and the soft lighting emphasized the Captain's perfect tan.

Rhonda took a deep, calming breath. "I can't establish contact with the Duran offices on the upper levels for the morning call. No one answers the comsystem and the offices are empty."

"Empty?" The Captain's square jaw tightened. "You must be mistaken. There has to be someone there. It's not like they could have gone out for a stroll." He opened a bottle, squeezed aftershave in his hands and slapped it on his cheeks.

"I checked all the security cameras." Rhonda pushed back a dark, curly strand of hair, painfully aware that uniform regulations prohibited loose hair, as well as scarves like the red one around her neck. As an artist, she found the gray uniform drab and liked a touch of color near her face. She knew the Captain enforced the rules, but she'd not expected to see him on this shift. "It's as if no one got out of bed this morning."

"Could it be some weird holiday?" Captain Cole Riggeur squinted in the mirror. "Maybe they are attending a religious ritual in the chapel?"

"No, Captain. I checked that, too."

"Can't you locate any of them?"

Frustrated by his lack of trust, Rhonda blurted, "Civilians don't wear locator chips, Captain."

“Don’t be a smart-ass, Rhonda.” His deep blue eyes narrowed. “I meant did you broadcast in all the common areas?”

“Yes, Captain, I did. No response.”

When he walked away from the camera toward the towel rack, Rhonda realized with a start that he was stark naked. From the back he looked like a statue from ancient Greece she’d seen in a museum on Banoi. Tall, athletic, the Captain had tightly curved muscles under a smooth, flawless skin.

Taken aback, Rhonda couldn’t control the flush heating her neck and rising to her cheeks. She’d never thought of Captain Cole Riggeur sexually, never pictured him naked, but this incident would make it difficult to erase the heavenly vision from her memory, a prime subject to keep in mind for one of her future paintings.

Although she felt silly for invading the man’s privacy, Rhonda knew the Garrison, unlike the civilian areas, had cameras everywhere. Any blind room could potentially hide an escapee. She’d better get used to it.

When he faced her again, Captain Riggeur wore a white towel around his waist. “Wake up the whole crew, send two teams to the surface to investigate and continue security sweeps. I’ll be right there.”

“Yes, Captain.” Had he seen her blush? She couldn’t wait to end the call.

“And, Rhonda?”

“Captain?”

“Lose the scarf and tie back that curly mane of yours.”

Rhonda bit back a sharp retort. The man might be gorgeous, smart, and a genius in his field, but he enforced discipline on the job like a ruthless bully.

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Cole Riggeur turned off the comscreen on Rhonda’s blistering glare then chuckled. She’d blushed. His body never failed to impress women but he’d not expected that reaction from a medic. He’d enjoyed Rhonda’s embarrassment. For the first time, she’d actually shut up for a few seconds and didn’t try to get the last word.

What could have happened to the office workers in the upper levels near the surface? Cole doubted they could still be asleep in their private quarters. How many times had he requested to have all civilian areas monitored? But Duran had largely ignored his recommendations.

Dropping the towel, Cole slipped on a white undershirt and shorts. Could everyone up there be sick in their beds? Poisoned by the food? Victims of an airborne virus? Could they all be dead? Good thing each level had an independent air-purification system. If they had died, whatever caused their death would remain isolated.

He reached for the gray uniform neatly folded on a shelf. The material, a mix of stretch microfiber and kevlar, served as body armor against blades and bullets while remaining light and comfortable to wear. Too bad, it didn't protect from phaser fire.

As Cole slipped into the one-piece body suit, his thoughts returned to Rhonda. She was smart and beautiful in a tall graceful way. The kind of woman he might get involved with if she weren't under his command. But Cole had strict personal rules about relationships on the job. He'd seen too many good leaders brought down by sexual harassment suits.

Besides, she talked too much. And on the job, she couldn't control her emotions and overreacted too often. Quick to anger, she panicked easily as well. Not a good quality for a guard.

The Garrison was no place for sensitive females. Cole would never have allowed her among his crew if not for her medical training. The Garrison had needed a medical officer for the third shift, and she had come in first on all the tests.

As he pulled on his gray boots, Cole shook his head, remembering how Rhonda had already questioned his orders several times in her short time here, and acted with total disregard for the rules. She behaved like a civilian while most guards working for Duran's contract prison had a military or mercenary background.

After checking the uniform in the full-length mirror, Cole buckled the belt and strapped on the holster with his regulation phaser. He'd come to the conclusion that he couldn't trust Rhonda. Her carefree attitude on the job and her lack of real life combat experience made her a potential liability in a dangerous situation. He snapped his compad on the belt.

From a hook on the wall, Cole lifted the yataghan, the deadly short blade he'd learned to wield on Upsilon Three. He tucked the slightly curved weapon inside one boot as a backup and a regulation dagger in the other, an old habit that had saved his life more than once.

His external communication implant, at the base of the neck above the right collarbone, itched. A light scratching rewarded him with static then he stepped out of his quarters into the hallway and blinked. It felt as if he'd walked outside from a beach house on a summer day.

The bright light emanated from the holographic sun baking a white sand beach with swaying palm trees that decorated the blind wall facing his quarters. Every half hour, the hallway hologram

switched to a different scenic view of faraway Earth.

As he hurried along the holobeach, the gentle surf washed the holosand at his feet. They'd reproduced even the sound of the waves and the cries of the seagulls. Cole smiled at the futile attempt to break the depressing monotony of living underground. These restful pictures didn't appeal to him. Born in the Andromeda Galaxy, like most of the Garrison personnel, Cole had never seen the blue skies of Earth, the cradle of human civilization. His ancestors from Earth had settled on Upsilon Three over six centuries ago.

"Damn!" Cole remembered he'd sent four guards to the corporate offices. What if there was a virus up there? He called on his external implant. "Control Room? Any trace of biohazard in the upper levels?"

Thrower's voice came through his implanted chip. "No, Captain. Already checked."

Cole felt relieved at the news, and at the fact that at least one competent guard had already reached the control room to replace Rhonda. Cole trusted Thrower. He'd worked with him for years and never found him lacking in professionalism or loyalty.

"Any luck contacting the surface?" Cole knew the corporate employees couldn't have left without informing the Garrison. Besides, someone always remained in the offices to oversee the mining operations, even between shifts.

"No, Captain."

"Keep trying." In his twelve years at the prison, six of which as Captain in command, Cole had never seen the corporate offices empty. The more he thought about this puzzle, the more sinister it appeared.

Cole emerged into the vast control room, more like a high-vaulted hall three stories high, with catwalks to access the fifth generation artificial intelligence hanging from the ceiling. The many concentric rings of the A.I. pulsed with blue light in a peaceful pattern, a far cry from a classic emergency. What the hell was going on?

The four guards present greeted Cole with tense faces. Raylor and Isle had joined Thrower and Rhonda, who remained out of the way on the periphery. The red scarf she'd removed from her neck now tied her hair into a ponytail. Still not regulation!

Cole suppressed a rebuke in front of the other guards. If indeed he had a true emergency on his hands, he needed everyone in good spirits. He nodded to the guards and glanced up at the bank of monitors displaying various parts of the giant facility. Nothing looked amiss, except for the three screens showing the offices just above, between the Garrison and the frozen surface of Zurin Five.

“Good morning, Captain Riggeur.” The A.I.’s synthetic voice sounded chirpy as usual.

“Morning, Skipper,” Cole answered automatically.

The machine, almost one of the crew, decided what to show the guards and when, evaluated the emergencies, and reported to the pertinent personnel. The A.I. regulated the life-support systems, and clothed and fed the hundred thousand prisoners detained at the facility at any given time. A sophisticated network of conduits allowed fully automated maintenance. Except for transfers and security emergencies, the prison required no human intervention. Skipper also supplied the civilian restaurants and the Garrison’s kitchen with high quality preserved ingredients.

The four guards in the room constituted half the Garrison crew. More than enough people to handle the job under normal circumstances, but if anything out of the ordinary ever happened, Cole knew the Garrison to be sorely understaffed. Only nine guards, including himself, oversaw the equivalent of a whole underground city.

Cole stepped up to the wrap-around console where Thrower and Raylor sat. “What did the systematic sweep turn up?”

“Nothing, Captain.” Thrower had an intense look about him, as if ready to pounce, each time his military training kicked in. “No trace of any office employee or mining worker, not even in the engine room. Should we send a call for reinforcement off-world?”

“Relax, Thrower.” Cole forced a smile and kept his tone optimistic. No need to get the guards scared. “Let’s find out what we are dealing with. Maybe it’s nothing serious. How far are our guys up there?”

Thrower seemed somewhat relieved by his Captain’s presence. “They’re still on Level Four. Found no one there. They’ve not reached the offices yet.”

Not surprising. For security reasons, stairs and elevators only linked two levels at a time. With each level entirely sealed off from the next, traveling up or down the many levels took time.

Isle, a cute woman guard with fierce cat eyes, outranked everyone except Cole, stepped up to the console. “Could they have been attacked from above by some disgruntled customers? No matter how you cut it, Styx is still an illegal drug in many sectors of this Galaxy. Duran has powerful enemies.”

“It’s unlikely that they were attacked.” Concerned about keeping his team together, Cole tried to exude a confidence he didn’t feel. He smelled a rotten bearcat and feared the worst, although he had no idea what that could be. “We’d know if there had been a skirmish. There would be signs.”

Thrower gave Isle a sidelong glance. “The last ships to attack Zurin Five didn’t do so well. With the kind of weapons Duran has on the surface, even a whole fleet wouldn’t stand a chance to land

on this rock.”

“Skipper,” Cole addressed the A.I.’s main screen. “Did you activate any defense weapons in the past twelve hours?”

“Negative, Captain Riggeur,” the cheerful synthetic voice answered.

“So we weren’t attacked.” Cole felt a headache coming. “What do you think happened to the corporate employees, Skipper?”

“I do not think, Captain, I compute.”

Cole refrained from cursing the A.I. and rephrased his question. “What do you know about the whereabouts of the civilian personnel?”

“They all left at three-hundred hours.” The smug finality in the A.I.’s electronic voice surprised even Cole. The smart machine never displayed emotions other than perky, supposedly a feature to boost the crew’s morale.

“They left in the middle of the night?” Stunned, Cole could only ask, “Where did they go?”

“Home.”

“Are you sure?” Cole regretted the question. The A.I. never spoke unless certain.

“Check my scanners,” the A.I.’s happy tone didn’t fit the situation. “The main hangar is empty and the transport is missing, as well as all the private vessels.”

Cole noticed the sudden seriousness on his guards’ faces. Although none of them commented, they knew this highly irregular detail could only mean serious trouble.

Fearing the answer, Cole asked, “Why didn’t you tell us that before, Skipper?”

“I was instructed not to, until four hours had passed, and only when specifically asked,” the A.I. answered.

A wave of dread engulfed Cole. “And who in hell gave that order?” Someone had compromised the A.I. and left his guards marooned on the planet. Why?

“The corporate manager,” Skipper uttered, interrupting Cole’s thoughts. “But he is not in hell, as far as I know.”

If the transport had left, Cole and his crew remained trapped on Zurin Five until the next transport arrived, and it wasn’t scheduled for twenty days. “Why did they leave?”

“I do not have that information,” came the A.I.’s response.

Cole wanted to grill the A.I. for more answers, but if someone had tampered with Skipper, Cole had to regard any information from Skipper as suspicious.

Raylor, a recent addition to the Garrison, a multi-talented man Cole hadn’t learned to trust just



yet, reclined in his chair and drummed his fingers on the console. “Maybe the civilians got scared about the recent tremors. It seems we’ve had a few more than usual lately.”

“Ridiculous.” Cole shrugged. “This facility stood steadfast for five hundred years and has never suffered from the quakes, no matter how violent. Duran built it to withstand any kind of seismic activity.”

Rhonda, who had remained silent since the senior guards had taken over, stepped forward. “I know for a fact that Duran would never abandon their precious mining operations. The Styx crystals are too valuable. It’s the lifeblood of the corporation.”

Her comment made sense and Cole had a bad feeling. “Skipper, who is supervising the mining operations?”

“The machines have stopped the extraction, Captain Riggeur.”

The A.I.’s upbeat tone annoyed Cole, who wondered with growing anxiety what prompted the corporate employees to leave their post and flee without notice. What did they fear? What did they know that he didn’t?

Thrower slammed a fist on the console. “Bet you they took the last load of Styx crystals with them.”

“Affirmative, Jonathan Thrower,” the A.I. chirped. “But I do not take bets. Gambling is against the rules.”

Cole understood Thrower’s concern. He suspected the man took Styx to dull the pain of old combat injuries. But a more alarming thought crossed Cole’s mind. “Did the prisoners get their daily dose this morning?”

“Negative, Captain Riggeur,” the A.I. chimed in. “My Styx vault is empty.”

“Good God!” Rhonda exclaimed as she stepped behind Cole.

Understanding her concern, Cole turned to face her. “How long before they get agitated?” He didn’t want to think of the consequences.

Glancing at the standard clock above the console, Rhonda counted on her fingers. “They’ll show the first signs of withdrawal before noon. Within two days, they’ll all be as psychotic as the worst Monacks, then many will get sick, some will start dying.”

A loud rumble shook the control room. Cole felt the floor move under him and grabbed onto the nearest console to remain standing. The lights flickered and red warnings flashed on several monitors. When the tremor ceased, the blue glow of the control room had dimmed. A number of monitors had shut down and a strident emergency siren accompanied the rhythm of more flashing lights.

“I have lost the feed from Level Nineteen,” said Skipper’s mechanical voice among the tumult of emergency warnings.

Assailed by the shrill sounds, Cole couldn’t think. “Turn off the damn sirens, Skipper, will you?”

“Yes, Captain Riggeur.” The raucous quieted. Only the red and blue lights flashed on the A.I.’s panels.

Rhonda’s classic face had turned pale, Isle, the other female guard, calmly gazed at Cole, waiting for orders. Raylor had stopped drumming his fingers but remained aloof, watching everyone.

Thrower still stared at his console. “We have a transformer short in the engine room. That’s probably what screwed up the feed.”

“We’ve got to fix it before we lose sight of the whole facility.” Cole knew this kind of problem could escalate if not dealt with swiftly.

“Captain? There is worse.” Thrower’s voice rose in pitch. “The temperature levels are rising in the nuclear reactor.”

Dread chilled Cole’s body. “The cooling system failed?”

“Must be a leak in the coolant.” Thrower studied his screen.

But Cole knew the system to be failsafe. “Aren’t the cadmium bars supposed to drop automatically to stop the reaction in case of leak?”

Thrower shook his head. “Looks like they didn’t drop. They must be stuck. Could be because of the quake.”

Cole tried to fathom the consequences of a nuclear meltdown. His head pounded and he found it difficult to make sense of their situation. Too many things happened at the same time. “How much time do we have?”

“It’s a small leak, it won’t get critical for a few hours. But we’ve lost control of Level Nineteen. I can’t order the robots to start on the modular repairs from here.” Thrower turned to Cole expectantly. “Someone will have to go down to Level Nineteen and direct the repairs from the control panel there.”

“Damn!” Under the series of unusual circumstances, going down to Level Nineteen would make for a long and dangerous trek. “What about radiation?”

“Should be okay at Level Nineteen. The reactor itself is much deeper underground. Only the robots performing the repairs will be exposed. Want me to go, Captain?” Good old Thrower always volunteered first.

“No. I need you to check the engine room.” Besides, Cole couldn’t risk any of his specialized

crew on that job. He'd go down into the bowels of the facility himself.

As the guards stared at Cole in the thick silence, awaiting orders, he motioned to Thrower. "Take Isle with you to fix the problem in the engine room."

Thrower rose from his chair and Isle stepped close to him at attention.

Facing them squarely, Cole tried to impart the importance of the job. "We can't remain blind to Level Nineteen. I'm counting on you to re-establish full control ASAP. Step on it."

Thrower nodded. "Sure thing, Captain."

"But just in case you don't get it working fast enough, I'm starting down to the bottom of the facility to direct the robots to repair the coolant leak." Cole forced a reassuring smile. "Keep in contact and let me know the minute you re-establish control. I hope I won't need to go all the way down, but if I do, at least I'll have a head start."

Understaffed indeed! As Thrower and Isle left toward the engine room, only Raylor and Rhonda remained beside Cole. He needed Raylor's expertise in the control room and guards had to travel in pairs at all times outside the Garrison. "Raylor, stay here to monitor communications."

"Me?" Raylor seemed surprised.

"You see anyone else?"

"If you insist." Smiling, Raylor gave a thumbs up and leaned back in his chair, as if getting comfortable for a long watch.

It wasn't Cole's style to risk a woman's life on what could easily become a dangerous mission, let alone a beautiful, intelligent woman like Rhonda, but right now he had no other choice.

Reluctantly, he faced her and sighed. "I guess it's you and me, kiddo. Time to show me what you are made of." His attempt at a smile failed miserably. He discovered he couldn't lie to Rhonda's face. "And you better not fall apart if anything happens down there. I don't want to have to carry you back up."

Rhonda straightened her tall frame. "I can take care of myself, Captain," she declared with unexpected bravado.

Cole snorted. "Grab a canteen and emergency supplies. You carry backup weapons?"

Rhonda seemed genuinely shocked. "Are we going to need all that?" She sounded like such a rookie.

Repressing a harsh retort, Cole explained patiently, "Since we can't see what's happening on Level Nineteen, I'm not sure what to expect. A good guard should always be prepared for the worst." Cole suspected Rhonda didn't care for his style of command, but Level Nineteen, the deepest level of

the underground facility, held the most violent convicts of the whole galaxy. Down there, the slightest mistake could turn deadly. “Let’s go.”

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### Level Nineteen (Crimson Zone), Block 52 - Cell 5263

In his crimson-striped cell, Tomar stopped drying his face in the red towel when he noticed a flicker in the artificial daylight. Another quake? No, the ground didn’t move, but all went dark as far as he could tell through his limited view of the corridor. A wave of protests rose from the neighboring cells.

Within seconds, the emergency lights kicked in, dimmer than the habitual illumination. Tomar had never seen the power fluctuate in the prison before. He looked up, trying to locate the red dot on the surveillance recorder, high above the bars that capped his cell. He couldn’t see it. As he walked the length of his cell, the camera failed to follow his movements.

The shimmering high voltage veil lining the titanium bars of the cell door and ceiling wavered then dissipated in a shower of sparks. Could it really be... Hesitantly, with a tinge of exhilaration, Tomar touched the naked titanium bars separating him from the corridor. No sizzle, no pain, no burn, no high voltage current! This looked like the opportunity he’d waited for all these years.

His neighbor across the corridor banged the bars of his cell with his bowl, an impossible thing to do when the high voltage security veil functioned. Other prisoners answered in kind, banging and yelling, their words incomprehensible, drowned by the growing clamor. Soon, the whole block seemed to participate in the joyous distraction. For the first time since his incarceration, Tomar felt incredibly alive. Excitement coursed on the surface of his skin and his coloration changed from stone-gray to vibrant blue and green.

Usually, after breakfast Tomar fell into a stupor, but not today. Even his sense of smell seemed sharper, as if the computer running the facility hadn’t doped the food this morning. Yes, he knew his jailors drugged him every day, but he couldn’t let himself die of starvation. Monacks had very long lives and Tomar had decided to bide his time. His whole body tingled with anticipation. Today was his lucky day. He could feel it.

Tomar’s superior strength would probably allow him to bend the bars to pass through, but his shape-shifting abilities seemed more appropriate to the situation. He made himself very thin, like a cut

out paper doll, and slid effortlessly between the tightly spaced bars.

Once in the hallway, Tomar realized the high voltage curtains had collapsed on the whole block as far as he could see. The cacophony of yells and clangs all around grew and echoed on the triple high ceiling. As he walked by their cells, inmates stopped banging the bars to stare at him in disbelief.

“How did you get out, Tomar? Can you get us out, too?” asked a Juzzaar, a huge humanoid with pale gold skin and dark glasses protecting his sensitive eyes. This one looked big, even for a Juzzaar, and stronger than all the other prisoners.

Tomar realized that alone he stood very little chance of escaping the high security facility, but if he gathered a gang of strong fighters, he might be able to muscle his way out of this dump. Taking on an unassuming human shape, Tomar smiled. “Who here knows about electronics? Enough to rewire the security gates?”

“I can do it,” said a skinny human, his aging skin pale from lack of sunlight. “I designed this system fifty years ago. There is an emergency release of all the doors for the bottom levels, and I know where it is.” The grizzled man didn’t look violent enough to belong on Level Nineteen.

“And why are you in this hell hole?” Tomar asked, suspiciously.

“Genocide.” The old man looked proud of his exploits. “I engineered the extermination centers for Xylon Three during the three-year revolt.”

Tomar emitted an almost human whistle. “Not bad, Gramps.” He had misjudged the little man. Tomar would use him, but he had no respect for sly killers. He needed more fighters like that big Juzzaar next door.

Tomar sized up the wily human. “Can you figure out the codes?”

Gramps smiled with thin lips. “With my eyes closed.”

“Better not lie to me, or I’ll rip your limbs off one at a time.” Tomar relished the prospect.

“I saw you shape-shift.” Gramps snickered. “I wouldn’t dream of lying to a Monack.”

Tomar motioned to the neighboring Juzzaar to come closer to the edge of Gramps’ cell. “Help me spread those bars.”

The Juzzaar smiled, as if eager to flex his muscles. He reached through the bars of his cell and grabbed the closest bar of his neighbor’s. Then he braced himself to pull it aside while Tomar pulled the next one in the opposite direction. Their combined efforts created a slightly wider space through which skinny Gramps slicked out like a worm.

“Thanks,” Tomar nodded to the Juzzaar then turned to Gramps. “So where is that control panel?”

“This way.” Gramps started up the corridor.

Tomar accompanied him through the complicated maze of intersecting walkways. As they took one turn after the next, Tomar lost his sense of direction and wondered whether the sly man had lied. “How far?”

“Right here.” Gramps indicated a metal plate on the wall.

Out of his human hand, Tomar grew solid curved claws. He inserted them under the cover plate and ripped it off the wall. Then he watched Gramps’ skinny fingers rewire the circuits. Soon, the sound of all the doors on the block sliding open in unison brought joy to Tomar’s acute sense of hearing. His heart would have pounded if he had one. But shape-shifters had no heart.

As the stunned inmates stepped out of their cells, some with hesitation, Tomar motioned to the most likely candidates for his gang.

Gramps, the garbage who had unlocked the doors, stepped up in front of Tomar. “What do I get for my services?”

“You are not finished yet.” Tomar couldn’t believe the arrogance of the little man. “We have more levels to liberate on our way up to freedom. The more chaos we create, the better our chances to get out of here.”

Tomar felt so good, like in the old days. Suddenly he remembered he’d not eaten raw meat in a long time. He spotted a plump human prisoner, probably fresh from the last transport.

Changing his shape from human to a gray screeching gargoyle with fangs and long sharp claws, he pounced on the fat man and ripped off his arm. The man screamed and struggled but couldn’t escape. Tomar held him down and plunged his claws through his chest to rip out his heart, rejoicing in the smell of fresh blood. He pulled out the beating heart, stepped off the bloody carcass, and bit into the red piece of meat. How he’d missed the old ways!

When a smaller Monack approached and bowed in submission, Tomar threw him the bloody arm. The Monack quickly retreated with his loot.

The other convicts watched, their faces petrified by fear.

Licking his fangs, Tomar emitted the approximation of a laugh then regained a non-threatening human shape. “I’m going to bust out of here. I need a gang, weapons, and tools. Without power, this facility is vulnerable. We have the numbers on our side. Who is with me?”

## Chapter Two

### Level Six - The Garrison

Nodding to her Captain, Rhonda wiped a sweaty hand on her uniform pants then applied her fingers to the scanner while he did the same on the other side of the elevator door. She knew the mining personnel wouldn't have left the planet in secret without a good reason, and she dreaded to discover the answer to that ominous enigma. She could tell the question loomed on her Captain's mind as well.

The door chimed and slid open. As both entered the elevator for the one-level-down ride, Rhonda wondered what they would find down below. Without camera feeds, without knowing what happened in the bowels of the prison, their mission could turn deadly. Rhonda realized that despite her good grades in practice, she'd never faced a real situation. She wasn't sure how she'd react.

When Rhonda glanced at the overhead camera, it moved. "At least the power failure does not affect the elevators and the security system. It could be much worse." She tried to sound cheery but it came out too strong.

"No kidding." The Captain's deep blue gaze held no humor and made her feel stupid. He looked like a ticked off bear.

His woody fragrance of moss and fern filled the elevator cubicle, and the sudden memory of his tanned body in the bathroom earlier took Rhonda by surprise. She automatically checked the perfectly round butt shaping the uniform then shook away a lascivious thought.

How could she think of him that way, and in such a situation? Besides, he was her boss, and any sane woman would find his open chauvinism insulting. She willed herself to stare at the elevator wall. "You don't like me much, do you?"

Cole Riggeur chuckled. "Straight to the point. I like that." A half smile flitted at the corner of his lips then vanished. "It's nothing personal, Rhonda. My only concern is the safety of the Garrison."

What was it with that man not respecting her? Rhonda didn't get him. "I may not be a lifetime professional in this field, but I passed all the tests required for this job. I am more than qualified."

"Of course, you are. You wouldn't have been hired otherwise." His intent stare sent a delightful shiver along her spine then he scowled. "But the liberties you take with the rules and regulations make

it difficult for others to trust you. You behave like a civilian and, as far as I am concerned, you are not ready to be a guard. Trust and respect must be earned, Rhonda, here more than anywhere else.”

*Touché!* Rhonda felt like a fool for broaching the subject. “Sorry, Captain. I’ll try to be more careful in the future.” Still, how could her artistic license with the uniform endanger anyone? She’d never met such a stickler for the rules. The short ride down to the next level seemed to last forever, but the height of each level represented three regular stories, and the hydraulic elevators didn’t go fast at all. She hoped they wouldn’t have to go all the way down. Surely Thrower would re-establish control and call them back up soon.

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### Level Seven - Pink Zone

When the door opened on Level Seven, recognizable by its pink stripes on walls and floor, both stepped out of the elevator. Everything seemed in perfect order and Rhonda consulted her compad for the layout. “This way.”

Captain Riggeur nodded. He’d probably been there countless times and knew his way around. Was he testing her? His condescending attitude made Rhonda want to slap him.

They walked through the complicated maze of staggered rows and blocks of pristine cells toward the far end of the ward. Level Seven, the Pink Zone, held the least violent inmates, like political prisoners, or non-lethal thieves.

There, Rhonda’s beloved sister had been kept until six months ago, when she died of a forced overdose of Styx. But no one could ever know about Rhonda’s personal connection to the prison.

Steeling herself against painful memories, Rhonda marched ahead. As she led the way, she avoided glancing at the prisoners dressed in pink behind titanium bars. The high-voltage fields lining the bars shimmered in the artificial light.

This early in the morning, most of the prisoners inside still slept. A few stared at the guards while others ignored them. A few prisoners raised their voices at the sight of the guards, but regulations specified guards should never make eye contact, acknowledge the prisoners, or speak to them between transfers.

Captain Riggeur acted as if these men and women dressed in the pink color identifying their detention level did not exist. Walking beside him, Rhonda watched her every step.



In the Pink Zone, special wards accommodated the particular needs of some species of humanoids, like dim cells for the Juzzaar, and adjustable temperatures to match various species' preferences. But on the deeper levels, Rhonda knew that the inmates had to adapt or die.

The guard's footsteps echoed on the shiny pink floor as they walked briskly along the cell-lined corridors. Consulting her pad, Rhonda took a turn and strode along the pink sameness.

The design of the prison had confused Rhonda when she'd first started working here, but she could now appreciate its efficiency. No short or direct easy way in or out of this facility. The huge underground fortress, a three-dimensional maze, could be locked down at any level. Each level had a totally different layout for its seventy-seven hundred cells of nine square meters each. A true labyrinth.

Without a blueprint, security codes, and the DNA of two guards on duty, no prisoner could ever work his or her way up to the surface. Even for the guards and in the best of conditions, the way down or up always seemed long and fastidious, with square turns and double-backs along several kilometers of staggered corridors on each level.

Repeating the security routine at the next elevator, Rhonda entered the metal-lined cage in silence, followed by her Captain. It would take hours to get down to the nuclear generator. Stuck with him for the duration, Rhonda needed a distraction from the growing feeling of doom she felt. Small talk might take her minds off the stressful situation. "Did you see any escape attempts during your time here?"

Captain Riggeur shrugged. "A few. Usually it happens during transfers. Prisoners tend to see any change as an opportunity."

"How far did they go?" Rhonda knew no prisoner had ever escaped Zurin Five in the facility's five hundred years of operation. A perfect record.

### Level Eight - Lilac Zone

The elevator door slid open and they exited on Level Eight, the Lilac-striped zone. Consulting her compad, Rhonda led the way again along rows of cells, each containing one lilac-clad prisoner. "So?" she asked. "How far did the prisoners ever escape?"

"Only once during my time here, an escapee made it all the way to the surface," the Captain said grudgingly.

"Were you in charge then?" Rhonda feared the question might infuriate him.

"Not a chance." The Captain looked so proud. "When I took over, I modified the procedures. It

will never happen again.”

“How did he get loose? Or was it a she?”

“It was a human male.” As Riggeur walked beside her, the overhead lights projected changing shadows in his blond hair and on the strong planes of his square face. “That guy had seduced two female guards, persuaded them he was innocent. Imagine that!”

Here it was again, a blatant distrust of women. Could that isolated incident account for the Captain’s misogynist attitude? “Two rotten guards do not make a whole gender liable, you know? Besides, a female prisoner could just as easily seduce two male guards.”

Captain Riggeur smiled disarmingly. “That’s why I never pair two guards of the same gender.” He remained silent as they opened the next elevator door and went in.

“How did the escapee get caught?”

“He made a mistake.” Captain Riggeur looked down at his boots as the elevator started down. “They all do.” Then he clammed up.

Rhonda found it particularly difficult to get information out of him. Unlike her, he didn’t seem to enjoy that social skill. She released a slow, calming breath. “Not prepared for the frozen conditions on the surface?” It seemed a logical mistake for an escapee.

“No, that one was smart.” Cole Riggeur grimaced. “He’d stolen an arctic parka and an oxygen mask on his way out. After the stupid female guards helped him out, he bound them, stole their weapons, and stuffed them in the lockers.”

Rhonda chose to ignore the anti-feminist slur.

#### Level Nine - Lavender Zone

The elevator door opened on Level Nine, the Lavender-striped level, and Rhonda stepped out to start another long walk toward the next elevator. “So, how did you find your guy? You zoomed in on his locator chip?”

Captain Riggeur shook his head as he caught up with her. “The prisoner had removed the implant with a knife. But in doing so, he’d left a trail of blood.”

“So, you followed the blood trail?” Rhonda found the story confusing.

“Nope.” Riggeur smiled devilishly. “But a bearcat did. By the time we found our man, a whole pride had feasted on his remains.”

“A bearcat? Those beasts really exist?” Rhonda wondered whether the Captain made fun of her

then she remembered his total lack of humor. “I thought these stories were only myths.”

“Oh, they are real enough. I saw a bearcat once from a flyer.” The Captain paused and his eyes narrowed, as if he could see the animal in his mind. “A white furry creature that blended with the ice, with saber claws and jaws full of fangs. They sure can run on that frozen ground. They use the low gravity to leap high and pounce with incredible speed.”

The description made Rhonda shudder. “And here I believed the guards invented these stories to discourage the inmates from escaping.”

“Obviously, that guy thought so, too.” Riggeur shook his head. “Served him right.”

Although shocked at her Captain’s lack of pity, Rhonda didn’t mention it. “What had he done to be here?”

“Don’t know and don’t care.” Riggeur turned ahead of Rhonda. So, he did know his way around. “All our inmates are here for a good reason.”

The comment annoyed Rhonda who knew differently. “How can you be so sure?”

“I’m not paid to judge them but to keep them locked away, keep the universe safe from their evildoing,” he said with conviction.

“You treat them as if they didn’t have a soul. They are people, you know?”

“Not here, they are not.” His jaw tightened. “The atrocities they committed stripped them of that title.”

“How can you be so cold?” Rhonda glanced at him as they reached the next elevator and applied their hands on the twin scanners at the same time. The door opened and they stepped inside.

“You are too soft for this kind of job, Rhonda.” The Captain held her gaze. “These people are the scum of the galaxy. They do not deserve your compassion. Never forget that.”

“What about those on the low-security levels? Not all of them deserve to be here. Some simply trusted the wrong people and are paying for the evil deeds of others.” She wanted to add, ‘like my sister’ but stopped herself.

“None of them is innocent, believe me.”

Rhonda boiled inside and couldn’t help but ask, “Why do you let Duran test the Styx on the prisoners? That drug eventually kills them, you know?”

A small grunt escaped Captain Riggeur. “You make it sound as if I had a choice. But you are right. I do prefer my prisoners calm and docile, and the Styx makes this facility safer for everyone.”

Upset at his shrewdness, Rhonda bit back a sharp comment.

“If it were up to me, I’d reinstate the death penalty for all these hardcore criminals.”

She offered a sardonic smile. “Without all these prisoners to look after, you wouldn’t have your precious job anymore.”

“It’s only a job.”

The matter-of-fact comment surprised Rhonda. The seriousness the Captain applied to his job had led her to believe he had a passion for it.

### Level Ten - Violet Zone

The doors opened and they exited the elevator on Level Ten, the Violet Zone. Rhonda glanced at her compad for directions. Still annoyed at the Captain, she started at a fast clip, ignoring a few crude comments from the convicts watching them go by.

Captain Riggeur followed her along row after row of perfectly aligned cells and connecting corridors. Close behind Rhonda he said, “We’ve all done something we regret in our lives. I know I did, you did, too, but hopefully we didn’t cause anyone’s death, and we regret our mistakes and try to make up for the hurt we caused.”

Rhonda almost stopped in her tracks but caught herself and resumed her brisk walk. Did her Captain know her secret past? Did he know she’d crossed the line once? Impossible.

In any case, he was dead wrong. Rhonda didn’t regret breaking the law. She’d do it all over again, given a chance. Duran had killed her sister and deserved all the damage Rhonda had inflicted to the company. But no one, absolutely no one could ever know.

They walked silently along staggered rows of violet-striped cells for a while then reached the next elevator and down they went.

“So why are you here?” the Captain asked, as he checked the overhead camera.

Rhonda almost jumped at the question. “I beg your pardon?” Did he really know something? Never before had he started a social conversation.

“Obviously you are not a professional guard.” The Captain stared straight ahead, as if fascinated by the brushed metal casing of the elevator. “So why in hell did you hire on at the Garrison?”

“Oh, that?” Rhonda must watch herself, here. “Lost my job at Duran labs. Cutbacks. I wanted to get back to Banoi, but it’s a long way across the galaxy. I need more credits to pay for my transport home.” She hoped he would believe the cutbacks story. In truth, she’d resigned after almost getting caught. “High risk jobs pay the most, as you well know.”

The Captain nodded. “Few want to work in this frozen hell hole, even for a nice sum of money.

You must be desperate to get back home.”

“I miss Banoi.” And that was the truth.

Afraid of saying something she would regret, Rhonda remained silent, and the Captain didn’t try to start another conversation. Strangely, she felt relieved.

It had taken them almost an hour to get to Level Eleven, the Indigo Zone, then they crossed Level Thirteen, the Turquoise Zone, Level Fourteen, the Aqua Zone, and Level Fifteen, the Green Zone.

Everything seemed fine on these levels, and Rhonda started to feel more comfortable, except for the thirst. The running made her drink more than usual from her canteen. Despite the potential gravity of the situation, this mission didn’t look so bad and might even prove exciting. She wondered why Thrower hadn’t called them back, yet. The repairs in the engine room must have gone slower than expected.

As they traveled in the elevator down toward Level Sixteen, the Captain surprised her by smiling. “I’ve never been to Banoi,” he said. “Was raised on Upsilon Three.”

Suddenly, the elevator shook with a metallic grind. Rhonda stepped sideways to compensate and keep her balance. The cabin stopped for a few seconds then resumed its downward course. Rhonda’s heart raced as she looked up at Riggeur. “Tremor?”

“Probably an aftershock of the big one earlier.” The Captain looked worried.

Although she knew the facility to be indestructible, Rhonda started to worry as well. The last two tremors had felt stronger and more dangerous than any of the previous ones that went mostly unnoticed.

### Level Sixteen - Yellow Zone

The elevator door opened on Level Sixteen, the Yellow Zone. Any trace of friendliness in the Captain’s expression disappeared as he tensed up like a leopard ready to pounce. He glanced right and left before stepping into the corridor.

Nothing looked amiss as Rhonda ventured after him on the yellow floor. Then she remembered to breathe and regretted it. “What’s that smell?”

The Captain drew his phaser out of his thigh holster. “You’re the medic, you of all people should recognize it.”

Then Rhonda identified the sweet coppery stench. “Blood!” And not just human blood. The smell reminded her of a wartime emergency ward. She drew her phaser with a trembling hand, trying to

remember her training. So, that's what it felt like to face real danger?

The Captain pointed to her phaser. "Set it on kill."

"Kill?" Rhonda had never killed anyone and doubted she ever could. As a medic, she'd sworn the Hippocratic oath.

"Stun doesn't affect the Monacks or the Juzzaar. Whoever spilled that blood, by whatever means, found a way out of his cell and could probably eat you alive. Let's not take any chances." He patted his boot under the uniform pants as if to check his dagger.

Rhonda swallowed hard. She'd seen a few Juzzaar, hulking humanoids with pale gold skin. They had sensitive retinas from having evolved on a shadowed planet and thrived in dim places, wearing dark glasses against any kind of light. "How could one prisoner spill so much blood?" The stench was overpowering.

"There must be more than one on the loose." The Captain glanced right and left along the corridor then un-clipped his com-pad.

"Could they have weapons?"

The Captain shook his head. "Unlikely. The only armory is on Level Six. This is probably the work of a Monack. You don't want to meet him."

A chill of dread traveled from Rhonda's head to her toes at the thought of these shape-shifters, who could grow razor-sharp claws, attacking with stealth and great speed. She gladly set her phaser on kill. "What now?"

Captain Riggeur tapped the external communication chip at the base of his neck. "Thrower, are you there? Come in, Control Room. We have a serious situation here." He indicated Rhonda's comimplant.

Rhonda tried to activate her chip as well but shook her head as she only heard static.

"The tremor disrupted communications." The Captain sighed.

Her throat so tight she couldn't speak, Rhonda nodded instead. How could the Captain remain so calm?

Captain Riggeur went to the wall panel opposite the elevator and punched in his code. "Thrower? Control Room? Skipper? Anyone there?" The panel didn't light up as it should.

Panic threatened to overcome Rhonda, but she struggled to remain calm, at least on the surface. It wouldn't do to lose her countenance in front of her boss.

Captain Riggeur punched more keys on the control panel. "Ordering total lockdown from Level Sixteen down to Level Nineteen. Execute order. Riggeur code two eight five alpha zero."

The control panel remained dark and silent, refusing to comply. Both stared at the panel in silence then at each other.

Rhonda understood. Cut off from the rest of the Garrison, she and the Captain could only rely on each other now. "I'm sorry, the circuits are down," was all Rhonda could say.

Captain Riggeur pounded the wall with his fist and leaned his forehead on the glass panel for a second or two. Then he squared his jaw and took a deep breath as he faced Rhonda. "Guess, it's up to you and me, kiddo. I hate to ask you this, but we have to go down the hard way."

Rhonda despised being called kiddo, mainly since he was only three or four years older than her. But given the gravity of the situation, she didn't make an issue of it. "What do you mean, the hard way?"

"When a prisoner gets out of his cell, the rule demands that we lock down each level manually, to prevent whatever happened here from spreading to the other levels. Help me disable this elevator."

Rhonda knew the routine but had only done it as an exercise. She applied her trembling hand to the scanner then Captain Riggeur entered a code only he could identify to render the elevator useless. Without that secret code, not even other guards could unlock it.

Cole motioned with his chin toward her compad. "Where is the next staircase? We've got to do the same thing to all the stairs and elevator doors on this level, whether they're going up or down."

After consulting her pad, Rhonda pointed with her phaser. "That way."

"Keep your eyes open, and your ears."

Rhonda felt light on her feet, her senses heightened by the adrenalin rushing through her blood. She'd never felt more scared and more alive at the same time, except maybe once, just before she resigned her position at Duran. But that had been more triumph than fear.

When they reached the first row of cells, Riggeur stopped. Rhonda halted beside him.

"Sweet Heavens!" Rhonda saw the otherwise empty corridor strewn with flayed corpses in yellow overalls among pools of dark blood. She suppressed the urge to heave. She'd done autopsies during her medical training, but this was fresh, bleeding meat on the bright yellow floor, and she didn't want to think about what kind of claws could have inflicted such wounds.

Obedying her medical training, Rhonda went from one body to the next, trying to find a pulse, a sign of life. Apparently the killers had done a thorough job. Rhonda found no wounded, only cadavers.

The Captain checked a few cells. "We may have more than one Monack on the loose. All the cells are open."

On both sides of the killing field, Rhonda noticed the open cells devoid of their shimmering veil.

Inside, more dead prisoners... “Where are the surviving prisoners and the murderous escapees?” she asked then regretted the dumb question. “Never mind.”

When Rhonda pushed the locator key on her compad, red dots appeared on the black screen in uneven groups between the green lines of the floor plan. The population of the whole level had congregated on various blocks. “All the prisoners are loose.” She felt her blood grow cold. “That’s what? Five to seven thousand escapees on this level alone?”

On the compad, she and Riggeur showed up as two blue dots. The red dots representing the dead prisoners around them did not move, but the various bands of prisoners loose on the floor seemed highly mobile.

Riggeur looked tense as he activated his own compad. His eyes switched rapidly from the pad to each end of the corridor. “There is one group between us and the closest stairs. They are probably looking for a way out, but with no floor plan they don’t know where to look.”

Grateful for the Captain’s leadership, Rhonda nodded. When it came to handling this kind of situation, she trusted him. “We can go around them this way.” She showed him her compad.

The Captain nodded. “Lead the way.”

Rhonda started at a stealthy run. She felt tempted to set her phaser on explode, so it would act like a grenade and send a burst to blow up a whole group of prisoners at once. But that wouldn’t be wise. Such a blast depleted the weapon’s chamber, and it took several minutes to recharge afterwards, minutes during which she would have no long-range weapon.

As she circled around the populated areas towards the next set of stairs, Rhonda realized the scope of their situation. She turned to her Captain as she kept jogging. “Do you intend to lock us down here with all these prisoners on the loose?” She cringed inside at the insane thought.

“It could be worse.” The Captain grimaced but didn’t miss one step. “If all the cells on this floor are open, there is a possibility that all the cells on all the levels below us are open as well.”

“You mean we could have thirty thousand of the most dangerous convicts at large? And you still want to lock us down with them? Just the two of us?” This mission sounded more and more reckless, even suicidal, but Rhonda didn’t say it.

The Captain showed no sign of changing his mind as he jogged alongside. “We now have two missions. Repair the cooling system before the nuclear reactor overheats, and keep the prisoners under control, no matter what. It’s our job. That’s why we get paid the big money.”

Of course, and Captain Cole Riggeur always did his job with the utmost dedication.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be fast. They won’t even know we are here.” The Captain offered a



strained smile. “But if the prisoners on the loose ever reach the upper levels, they would execute all the guards and probably hundreds of prisoners as well.”

The thought hit Rhonda like a revelation. She could die here today. She didn’t want to.

## Chapter Three

### Level Sixteen - Yellow Zone

Silencing the warnings going off in his head, Cole braced himself to tighten the wheel of the thick titanium door then punched in his security override to disable it. The job took longer than he'd hoped. He leaned on the yellow duracrete wall briefly. Was it hot, or did the stress make him sweat? He took a sip from his canteen and offered it to Rhonda who shook her head in refusal.

"Any prisoners in the vicinity?" he whispered. Cole could check his own compad, but Rhonda needed the practice. Although she'd never navigated the complex by herself before, she seemed to be learning fast. He felt proud of her.

Rhonda watched her compad. "All clear for now."

Cole tried his implant for the fifth time. "Control room, come in. Whoever can hear me, please respond." No answer. He turned to Rhonda. "Sorry to get you in this mess, kiddo, but we can't afford a nuclear meltdown or mayhem."

Rhonda shot him an angry glance. "Why do we have to lock all the doors on all the floors? Why don't we just gas the lower levels, get down as fast as possible then after we fix the reactor's cooling system get back up and lock down each level on our way up?" She charted a course on her compad and started running.

"I wish we could, believe me." Cole almost had to jog to keep up with her. "But the wall panels aren't responding and I don't have a link to the control room to gas them."

"Then why not lock down only Level Sixteen. Even if they are loose in the deeper levels, which is a big if, as long as they can't make it above Sixteen, the Garrison should be safe enough."

Cole hated to explain himself, but he knew Rhonda would never give up. "There is no such thing as safe enough. In this business, what you don't know can and will kill you."

Rhonda stilled looked peeved but didn't argue.

"From here on, we need to inspect each floor as we go. The quakes could have opened breaches in the walls, exposed panels where prisoners could rewire the security circuits."

"Really?" She frowned but didn't slow down. "They have the knowledge to do that?"

“Some of them might. The worst criminals are often very smart. We have to assume the worst. What if some broken walls bared gaping service conduits? What if the prisoners climbed the pillars to reach the ceiling pipes?”

Rhonda glanced up at the ceiling crisscrossed with wide air ducts and pipes of all calibers. “It would give them an opportunity to crawl up from inside, all the way to the surface?”

“And bypass all the security locks. How safe would the Garrison be then?” Cole wondered how safe the other guards were now but didn’t share that thought.

Rhonda looked unsure but kept walking while watching her compad to avoid loose prisoners. She demonstrated an uncanny ability to navigate around them.

Wishing for more options, Cole realized he had no choice. “From here on, we do everything by the rules. Only when the cooling system is restored and the lower floors are secure, do we find our way back up, understood?”

“Yes, Captain.” Rhonda’s voice shook. “Then what?” She stopped in front of another door.

Why did Rhonda have to ask so many questions? Going through the routine, Cole pressed his hand on the scanner then punched in his code. “Once everything is secure, we’ll send a call off planet and sit tight until a special team arrives to help us return the prisoners to their cells.”

“What if we don’t make it back up?” Rhonda’s voice quivered, but her face remained calm. She looked away and resumed her fast walk toward the next exit door.

Cole felt terrible as he followed her and cleared his voice. On such a dangerous mission, he owed her the truth. “I hope it doesn’t come to that, but that’s a risk we must take. Sorry about that, kiddo. I don’t like playing hero either, but it seems logical to sacrifice two people and save as many as we can, rather than let everybody die, including us. We can’t afford to take any chances. The Garrison relies on us.”

She looked at him sideways and didn’t challenge him. But as he feared, Rhonda couldn’t keep silent very long. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of the crew earlier, Captain, but I think I figured out why the Duran personnel left.”

“By all means, Sherlock, tell me.” Cole had a feeling she would tell him whether he wanted to hear it or not.

“When I worked in the lab, I warned them about mining the Styx crystals at such a reckless rate.” Despite their brisk walk along the yellow-striped corridors, Rhonda didn’t sound winded.

“What do you mean?” Cole smiled inwardly. Of course, Rhonda would tell Duran how to conduct their business.

“You see, they leave all these abandoned mining shafts in the mantle of the planet and don’t fill them back up. There are deep underground tunnels that go for hundreds of kilometers through rock and ice, sometimes dangerously close to natural trenches and rifts between tectonic plates.”

“And?” Cole kept walking, amazed by Rhonda’s staying power.

Suddenly she stopped and motioned for him to stay behind. “There is someone in that corridor,” she whispered.

“Dead or alive?”

“Can’t tell. It’s not moving.”

“How far?”

“Twenty meters.”

Cole dropped to the floor and inched his head around the corner to take a peek. A prisoner lay on the floor. “He’s down. Still, be careful, he could be alive and give us away.”

Carefully, they entered the connecting corridor and approached the inmate who looked dead. Rhonda stopped and knelt to take his pulse.

“What are you doing?” Cole couldn’t believe she would stop for a convict.

“If he’s alive... It’s my job, too.”

Red dots on Cole’s compad converged toward the two guards. “We don’t have time for that,” he whispered. “Get moving, we have company.”

As if with regret, Rhonda rose and focused on her compad. So did Cole as they left the body behind. With all those inmates at large, two pairs of eyes offered better safety.

Once out of earshot from the many red dots on the compad, Cole asked, “What were you saying about Duran’s mining techniques?”

Rhonda looked at him with surprise on her face. “Oh? Yes, this is a living planet, not a dead moon. It has a hot core and magma below the crust.”

“Everybody knows that.” Cole wondered where she was going with her train of thoughts.

“And the tremors have become more frequent lately, haven’t they?”

“Yes, but they usually happen in cycles.” He’d show her he remembered a thing or two from his days at Upsilon Three’s renowned university. “This is probably a stronger cycle.”

“I don’t think so.” Rhonda bit her lips as she walked. “I suspect all these voids in the mantle have destabilized the tectonic plates. If I’m right, the domino effect will bring more frequent and more violent tremors on the entire planet, and the rate will quicken. It’s already accelerating.”

Boy, she had a flair for the dramatic. “That’s pure conjecture, Rhonda. We don’t know that for

sure. You have a fertile imagination.”

“Oh, I know what I know all right. I may not be a professional guard, but I am a scientist.” She turned into a corridor, eyes on her compad. “Next, new volcanoes will emerge, the ice will melt, forming lakes and oceans, magma will rise to the surface, and things will only get worse from there.”

“I doubt it very much. You sound more and more like a pessimist.” Cole hated doomsday prophets, and this trait in Rhonda bothered him. “Give Duran some credit. They’ve been mining this planet for fifty years and they know their stuff.”

Rhonda shrugged. “There were no tremors before they started mining, and the conditions only worsened with time. Duran got greedy. They couldn’t dig out their precious Styx fast enough.”

Cole checked his own pad to make sure Rhonda followed the right path, avoiding any red dots. She did great. “What makes you think you’re right?”

“They left, didn’t they? And fast.” She glanced at him sideways as they walked. “That can only mean there is little time. They expect the planet to go critical soon.”

“Nonsense.” Cole had never heard such absurdity. “If there was danger, they wouldn’t abandon us here.”

Rhonda scoffed. “Wouldn’t they? They probably didn’t tell you about it, because they knew you would insist upon evacuating the guards, along with some of the low-security prisoners, and there was no time and not enough room on their transport. So they decided to leave us here to die with our charges. Shrewd but efficient.”

“I refuse to believe that.” Cole feared the stress had turned Rhonda bitter, if not raving mad. “Duran takes care of its own. Always has.”

“Ha!” She accelerated her pace. “Believe what you want. But I’m telling you, if we don’t find a way off this planet soon, it won’t matter whether the reactor melts down or not, or whether the prisoners are secured or not. We’ll all die.”

Cole wished she would shut up. She painted a sinister picture he hoped, for all their sakes, would not come true.

Rhonda stopped suddenly into a small recess as if to catch her breath.

Surprised, Cole stopped as well, welcoming the respite.

She turned and planted herself in front of him. “Captain, we have to warn the Garrison, let them know they must find a way off the planet and fast.”

Stunned by the intensity in her tone and the fire in her deep brown eyes, Cole feared the stress must have gone to her head. “Get a hold of yourself, Rhonda.” He felt hot and sweaty under the

uniform and opened his collar. “The temperature controls must be fixed.”

A buzz in his implanted chip signaled an incoming communication. Thrower’s voice sounded in his inner ear. “Can you hear me down there?”

Cole motioned for Rhonda to listen on his frequency. She turned on her own comchip and returned her attention to her compad.

Relieved by this welcome communication, Cole smiled. “I see you fixed the com, Thrower. Good job! It’s good to be connected again.”

“Everything okay, Captain?”

“Not exactly.” Cole sobered. “It’s worse than anything we expected. All the prisoners are loose on Level Sixteen, and we have bodies, lots of them.”

Thrower whistled through the implant. “Gee whizz! How is Rhonda holding up?”

Rhonda shot Cole a furious glance but didn’t say a word. Cole noticed that she behaved professionally by keeping watch on her compad for unwanted visitors.

Cole suppressed a smile. “Rhonda’s doing just great, but we need reinforcements. I have reasons to believe more inmates are loose on the lower levels, and we may have problems keeping them at bay while we program the repairs. What about sending us one of the teams from the surface? What did they find out up there, anyway?”

“Doesn’t look good, Captain. We found out why the Duran employees left. It’s really bad news here, too.” Thrower cleared his throat but said no more.

Cole hated the ominous silence. “The suspense is killing me. The hell with it, Thrower, spit it out!”

The implant gave out static, then Thrower’s voice. “The off-scale seismic activity is only the beginning. All the plates are moving now. We expect the planet to destabilize.”

Cole avoided looking at Rhonda. He dreaded the triumphant told-you-so expression on her face. “How much time do we have?”

“Ten days, twelve at the most, before it gets critical.”

“How critical?”

“Looks like the planet won’t make it, Captain. According to the computer projections, it will eventually blow up.”

Cole tried to assimilate the information, reviewing in his mind all the ramifications and consequences, but it seemed too much to process.

As Cole remained silent, Thrower said hesitantly, “There’s worse, Captain. They’ve collapsed

the communication tower.”

“You mean the quakes did?”

“No, Captain.” Thrower hesitated. “It was deliberate. Someone sabotaged the emitter. I can’t send any message off world.”

“Damn!” Cole felt utterly betrayed. He’d worked for Duran over twelve years and believed they appreciated his dedication. Didn’t they have at least a shred of integrity toward their key personnel? Whatever happened to trust and loyalty? The corporate bastards knew the planet would blow and they intended for the Garrison to perish! No one would ever know. It would look like an accident.

“Looks like we are stuck here without possibility of rescue.” Thrower sounded as mad as Cole felt.

But Cole had to control himself and think about his crew. “A transport would take weeks to get here anyway. We just have to find our own way off this rock.”

“How do we do that?” A hint of hope surfaced in Thrower’s tone.

“Don’t worry, Thrower, we’ll make it.” Cole glanced at Rhonda who drank from her canteen. She listened stoically, showing no sign of falling apart. She didn’t collapse into sobs. He’d underestimated her courage. To Thrower he said, “Send the team closest to the surface looking for a ship, anything that can fly.”

“Amani and Nya are on the surface now,” Thrower said. “I’ll send them on a search. But given the circumstances, I doubt they left any ship left that’s space worthy.”

“We don’t need a real ship. There might be a few reconnaissance flyers and small cargo shuttles that can jump us into high orbit and hopefully a little farther. Tell our guys to search the maintenance bay and the old abandoned hangars. See if they can come up with something, anything.”

Rhonda recapped her canteen. “Whatever they find won’t take us to the nearest planet, Captain.”

“True.” Cole smiled to reassure her. “But from space, we can send an SOS to other planets and wait to get rescued.”

“Like an escape pod?” Thrower exclaimed through the internal chip.

“That’s the idea.” Cole rejoiced at the effect of his words on Thrower’s morale and hoped it would heighten the mood of the other guards as well. “We’ll need food and water for at least three or four weeks.”

Relief and excitement now tinted Thrower’s voice through the microchip. “Okay, Captain. I think we can do that. And I’m sending Javel and Xerna in your direction.”

“Wait. We are on lockdown.” Cole punched a sequence on his compad. “I’m disabling all the

doors below Level Fifteen. Let me send you the new code.” He pushed the send button. “Got it?”

A violent quake rumbled and shook the corridor. Ceiling pipes and conduits broke loose and clattered on the duranium bars topping the cells. Electric sparks flared as exposed wires swayed, hanging from broken tubes. Cole side-stepped to avoid a shower of dirty water that splashed on the yellow floor.

He glanced in Rhonda’s direction. She had retreated into the relative safety of an empty cell and crouched, holding on to the bolted bunk bed. She’d even managed to stay dry.

Cole joined her inside the cell and crouched at her side to weather the aftershock. He attempted to re-establish the communication. “Thrower? Can you hear me?” He only heard static. “Shit!” He tapped his comimplant but it had shut down. “I hope Thrower received the code.”

A nervous twitch danced around Rhonda’s brown eyes. “Captain, do you really think we stand a chance to make it off this planet alive?”

“Of course, I do.” Cole didn’t share his doubts about his desperate plan. He considered Rhonda with renewed respect. She had seen the cataclysm coming and went on their dangerous mission anyway. It took determination.

“But even if they find a bucket of bolts that can fly, who will pilot it?” Rhonda showed a surprising ability to foresee problems. She had already analyzed the options and dealt with her fears rationally.

“One problem at a time, Rhonda.” Cole didn’t remember any guard listing piloting skills on their job application. “I’m sure we can find a low-security prisoner on Level Seven who has a pilot license.”

Cole rose and walked out of the cell. The search for a ship gave the crew new hope and something to do. Cole had to keep their morale high. One way or another, he would try his very best to give them a chance to survive. And right now, the best he could do was make sure his crew didn’t get killed by a nuclear meltdown, or by escaped convicts, before finding a way to leave this disintegrating planet.

“Climate shafts must be down, too. It’s getting hotter.” Cole motioned toward the fallen pipes strewn on the floor.

“I don’t think it’s the environment system, Captain.” Rhonda joined him in the corridor and applied her hand to the yellow surface of the plain durancrete wall. “Feel that?”

The wall felt smooth and warm to Cole’s touch. “Fire on the other side? The reactor couldn’t have gotten that hot that fast.”



Rhonda checked her compad. “We are on the periphery. This is an outside wall. Behind it should be rock and ice. The heat can only come from the planet itself.”

“If you are right, we better get moving.” Cole wiped his forehead. “Which way?”

Rhonda pointed down the corridor.

Melting ice, lava flows... Cole remembered Rhonda’s previous warning. “By the way, you were right about the domino effect. I apologize for treating you like a doomsday freak earlier.”

“But, you still don’t trust me to do the job with you, so you asked for two more sacrificial lambs to join us in this infernal place.” Rhonda gave him a hard look. “If they received the code, they’ll come for us and be just as doomed as we are.” She hesitated. “This is a suicide mission and you know it.”

Cole resented the accusation. “If I didn’t believe it could work, I wouldn’t insist upon doing this. But if you really want to know, I expect to get out of this hole and off this planet alive with my crew. And you better stick to me and follow orders if you want to get out alive, too.”

They took the last working elevator from Level Sixteen and went down.

#### Level Seventeen - Orange Zone

When they exited on Level Seventeen, Orange Zone, Cole disabled that elevator as well. As they set out toward the next door, Level Seventeen confirmed Cole’s worst fears. All the security shields had failed, and all the cell doors gaped open. They found the same scenery as on the previous level, with broken conduits fallen from the ceiling, and the disturbing stench of carnage. Why did the systems have to fail in the worst section of the facility?

The sound of conversations and arguments somewhere on the floor mixed with the many mechanical noises of the facility itself. Through the broken conduits the water sounds, the thumping of the cooling pumps, the ventilation fans through the shafts created a constant humming.

Cole realized with apprehension that if the prisoners on all the floors below were loose as well, their small chance of success had just shrunk considerably. “Great!” He sighed. “Any convict in sight?”

Consulting her compad, Rhonda started jogging. “Better hurry, they are close.” She had stamina and guts for a civilian. She pointed at fallen pipes, orange, like the stripping on the duracrete walls and the floor. “Looks like some segments are missing.”

“I suspect the small ones would make handy clubs and even blades.” Cole tried to think of other weapons the prisoners could have found or manufactured from the various pieces of orange metal strewn

on the floor. Desperate people did desperate things, as he often said.

Eyes riveted on their compads to avoid meeting any prisoners, Cole and Rhonda hurried from elevators to staircase doors and locked them all down. But the last elevator down didn't respond to their DNA or to the security codes.

Cole sighed, wondering how many more setbacks they could stand without compromising their entire mission. He didn't even think in terms of survival anymore. He only wanted to prevent a premature meltdown. "The quakes must have fried the circuits. This elevator won't work no matter what. We better double back toward the stairs."

As they set out at a run, an aftershock rumbled. Leaning on the walls, holding on to bars, staggering as they walked, they kept going, sometimes on all fours, all the time dodging falling pipes.

"Captain, do you see that?" Rhonda stopped against a wall, indicating her compad.

Glancing at her device, Cole saw two red dots traveling between them and the stairs in the next intersecting corridor. "I got it. Don't slow down, Rhonda. I'll take care of it."

Cole took the lead. As he turned into the corridor, he aimed and fired twice, the zing of his phaser barely noticeable over the overwhelming background noise. Both convicts crumpled to the floor.

"They were unarmed." Rhonda's tone held reproach despite her calculated breaths. "Did you have to kill them?"

"They could have been shape-shifters, or one could have told the others. As long as the other inmates don't know we are here, they are not hunting us." Cole flinched. He shouldn't have said that. He and Rhonda would make a target of choice, and he didn't want to fuel her fears.

They reached the condemned stairwell, but re-opening the door took more time than anticipated. Cole had to rewrite the security codes again.

"Hurry," Rhonda whispered, focused on her compad. "Prisoners coming this way."

*Shit!* "I still need a few seconds. Cover me."

A motley group of escapees in orange overalls, mostly humans but comprising a few bigger alien specimens as well, came around a corner, less than a hundred meters away. When they spotted Cole and Rhonda, they yelled and charged toward them, brandishing pipes and metal bars, as well as mean looking orange shards. Cole forced himself to ignore them and punched in the complicated sequence, aware of Rhonda firing several rounds.

Finally the heavy door gave in. Cole braced himself against it to push it ajar. He grabbed Rhonda who stopped firing and shoved her through the gap as he pulled out his phaser, fired a few rounds, then squeezed out after her. Together they pushed and wheeled the door shut to the muffled

clang of pipes banging on the other side of the titanium casing. Cole holstered his phaser to punch in his secret code and disable the door.

Relieved, he allowed his body to relax a little as he started down the long metallic staircase, where the steps echoed in the narrow cage. “Thanks, kiddo. You looked pretty fierce back there for your first baptism by fire.”

“How many times do I have to ask you not to call me kiddo.” Rhonda’s proud smile, however, denied the harshness of her comment. “You think I did okay?”

“Couldn’t have done better myself.” Did he see her blush? Suddenly Cole remembered the last time he saw her flushed like that, just this morning, when she realized he stood naked in his bathroom. He’d never suspected Rhonda had a shy bone in her, especially being a medic. He realized he found that trait endearing in a woman.

Even as they descended the many flights of stairs, the wall color changed gradually from orange to bright vermillion, announcing Level Eighteen. Water seeped from vertical cracks in the wall of the tall staircase.

“Broken water pipes?” Cole knew better but he couldn’t help teasing Rhonda.

Glancing at the cracks, Rhonda shook her head. “There are no pipes in this wall. Most likely melting ice from the outside. If this gets worse, the deepest level could be flooded.”

They reached the door at the bottom of the stairs. “Are the prisoners loose on this level, too?” By now, Cole trusted Rhonda with her pad.

Rhonda checked and nodded. “They’re loose all right, but none are in view of the door. The way to the next stair door looks clear.”

### Level Eighteen - Vermillion Zone

As they exited the stairway on Level Eighteen, Vermillion Zone, Cole glanced right and left. While Rhonda checked the compad, it didn’t hurt to use direct visual as well. Some obstacles might not register on the pad. “Let’s get going.”

They went faster on that Level as they found the elevators already out of order and sealed shut. The quakes had damaged the hydraulics. So they only had to disable the doors to the stairs. While descending the last set of stairs to the deepest level, the wall stripes changed from vermillion to crimson.

Hearing faint noises coming from the other side of the titanium door, Cole stopped at the bottom of the stairs to listen, sticking his ear to the metal. He’d better not barge out into a melee. Someone on

the other side was trying to force open the door. He stepped back when loud banging from the other side shocked his ear. Someone was trying to turn the manual wheel but it didn't budge.

Cole brought a finger to his mouth to signal Rhonda to remain silent. He used sign language to direct her to help him disable the door from inside the stairwell. He entered the new code, then he and Rhonda had to climb back up to Level Eighteen and find another set of stairs to get down to the lowest level.

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### Level Eighteen - Vermillion Zone

On the way to the closest stairwell, with the Captain close behind, Rhonda wondered whether this mad race through dangerous territory would ever end. How much more could her frazzled nerves take of this spooky excitement? The recruiting ads promised an easy job with many perks and rewards for fit adventurers, but this wasn't worth all the wealth in the Andromeda Galaxy.

Watching her compad as she speed-walked, Rhonda noticed two groups of convicts quickly converging toward an intersection ahead, just beyond the next turn. About twenty inmates total. She turned out of sight of the main corridor into an open cell then stopped and faced the Captain. "See them?"

Consulting his own pad, the Captain nodded. "There is no way around them. To avoid that intersection, we would have to double back, pick another set of stairs, a detour of almost a kilometer."

"What do we do?"

The Captain sighed. "Wait a few seconds. See which direction they take at the intersection."

On Rhonda's compad, the red dots congregated at the crossway and remained there. "They don't seem to want to go anywhere." But now the dots darted around like bees from a disturbed hive, chasing each other. Faint sounds of strife reached Rhonda's ears over the surrounding humming sounds of the heavy equipment cooling and maintaining the facility. "What are they doing?"

"Probably fighting," the Captain whispered. "Some sound like women."

"Women?" Rhonda had not thought of it, but with male and female wards on the same level it would happen. The recollection that her sister did not survive prison treatment intruded on her mind. She'd said she'd been tortured despite the Treaty of Vestusta that guaranteed the humane treatment of prisoners. Rhonda wondered what kind of other abuse her sister had suffered before dying of the drug.

The thought still stung. Rhonda shook away the hurt. “Most women prisoners can defend themselves as well as men.”

The Captain chuckled. “I know women that can be far more aggressive than men.”

The thought of wild amazons attacking a group of men distracted Rhonda from her bitter thoughts. The sounds of violence mounted. She focused on the compad. “Seems rather intense.”

“If they are busy arguing and fighting, maybe we can sneak past them. They may not notice us. There are not that many, and we are armed.”

“Are you sure?” Rhonda shuddered. “With the Styx withdrawal they become more dangerous as time passes. They have nothing to lose and no sense of fear or danger.”

“But we’ve got to keep moving.” Cole Riggeur seemed impatient, peeking outside the cell, listening. “Each time we stop we increase our chances of getting discovered and attacked, or worse... trapped in a dead end corridor.”

Rhonda realized the truth in the Captain’s words too late. “Someone is coming behind us.” She watched the red dots moving fast on the compad. “A larger group, about thirty or so.”

“Shit!” The Captain rarely used that kind of language but seemed to favor it today. “If we can’t go back, then we have to go forward.”

“Maybe we could hide until they all leave.” As she said it, Rhonda realized there weren’t any objects in the cells to hide behind.

“No.” Cole had seen that, too. “Besides, any hiding place could become a death trap if they find us. And some species have a sharp sense of smell.”

Rhonda knew he referred to the Monack shape-shifters and the reptilian Karatzin. “You are the Captain. You decide.”

“I say we make a run for it.” He pointed at the path highlighted on his compad. “Memorize the path. We go this way, and if we get separated, we wait for each other at that stairwell door.” He tapped the pad with one finger. “Got it?”

“Got it.”

The Captain switched off the pad and drew his phaser.

Heart in her stomach, Rhonda pulled out her weapon and set it on kill.

“Follow me close.” The Captain took off at a run.

Rhonda followed in the shadow of his athletic body, easily keeping up with his quick pace. She felt thankful for the quiet soles of their boots. At least, the rioters would not hear them coming. She liked the advantage of surprise. It minimized the risks somewhat.

As they rounded the corner, Rhonda could clearly see the intersection twenty meters away, approaching fast, but the scene she beheld did not quite register at first.

In the middle of the floor, on a pile of foam mats ripped from bunk beds, male convicts held two naked females and one young male. Other inmates, trousers down, mounted them crudely in full view.

Appalled, Rhonda felt pity for the victims and wanted to help, but she couldn't possibly stop. One of the women seemed unconscious. The other two victims struggled and received blows for their lack of submission. Impatient males waiting their turn pulled the lucky ones off their prize and quarreled about who would get to mount next.

Rhonda averted her gaze. Disgust threatened to make her heave, but she had to keep running toward the gruesome scene. *Stay on course, focus on the path, and try to pass them by without getting caught.* Cole had seen them, too, and like her kept his eyes on the narrow path at the edge of the mob.

She didn't want to think about what these men would do to a female guard. She now regretted her long curly mane and the red scarf of the ponytail that marked her as female. As much as she hated to admit it, the Captain had been right to enforce that rule. Using him as a shield, she ran close behind him as fast as she could.

Not fast enough.

One of the convicts caught sight of the two guards as they whisked by. "Stop them!" he yelled.

A burly man grabbed Rhonda by the arm as she ran past the raping mob. She struggled to keep running but he dragged beside her like dead weight. She couldn't shoot as he held her phaser arm. Besides, shooting someone who held you would be like shooting yourself. In a desperate attempt to shake off her attacker, she kicked him, but he held fast.

Suddenly the Captain was there, beside her, punching the convict's face. He didn't use his phaser since Rhonda was in direct contact with the target. On the second punch, the convict lost his grip and slid to the floor.

The Captain grabbed Rhonda's hand and they ran together. Behind them, the inmates started in pursuit, yelling obscenities drowned by the surrounding purr of the environmental equipment. Glad for the timely rescue, confident in her good physical condition, Rhonda kept moving her legs like a sprinter, looking straight ahead, vaguely aware of the few pursuers who still tailed them.

The Captain led her into an adjoining corridor then veered into another row of cells. After a few more turns, the sounds of pursuit faded, and Rhonda could only hear the drumming of her heart in her chest and the bellow of her breath.

Once at a safe distance from any pursuer, the Captain slowed down and let go of her hand. He

holstered his phaser and checked his compad. “We lost them.”

Happy to slow down, Rhonda stashed away her weapon. “I’m grateful for your help back there,” she managed to utter between ragged gasps. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

The Captain seemed embarrassed by her gratitude, looking straight ahead as he walked. “It was my decision to take a calculated risk when we charged the mob.” He shrugged. “I felt responsible.”

“Your idea worked out in the end. That’s what counts.” Rhonda’s smile came out strained. “It was scary but we made it didn’t we?”

“Yes, we did.” When they approached the stairwell door, the Captain clipped his compad back on his belt. “But it was a close call. We were lucky this time.”

As she applied her hand to the scanner to open the door, Rhonda wondered how long their luck would hold.

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### Level Nineteen - Crimson Zone

Still shaken at the idea of what could have happened to Rhonda, Cole took the lead after they emerged on Level Nineteen, Crimson Zone, into an empty corridor. The devastation at that level seemed worse than whatever they had seen so far. As he feared, the prisoners ran loose on that level, too, and they were the worst convicts of all.

Water dripped from the walls and ceiling and puddled across the floor. Human sounds seemed eerily absent. Cole knew his way around Level Nineteen and only watched for loose prisoners on his compad as he led Rhonda toward the control panel regulating the nuclear reactor.

As they reached a long corridor, debris had blocked that passage and they had to find their way around the blockage. Soon, Cole realized that debris blocked several hallways, and fallen walls opened new communicating paths between previously sealed corridors. He couldn’t trust the floor plans of his compad anymore. They’d lost part of their advantage in navigating the labyrinth.

Cole spotted the command panel. “Here it is.” He hurried, hoping the panel would still function properly. As he touched the electronic plate, it chimed and lit up in recognition of his DNA. A wave of gratitude washed over him. “This is good. Rhonda, watch out for unwanted company. I need to concentrate on the repairs.”

Rhonda nodded and watched both her compad and the empty corridor. “Hurry up. They are not

very far, but I got your back.”

Although Cole felt vulnerable, his back to the open corridor, he tried to forget about their scabrous, even perilous, situation. He had to trust Rhonda sometime. After punching his personal code sequence he touched the radioactive symbol. A color graphic of the nuclear reactor appeared on the screen, outlining in red pulsing dots the leak in the cooling system.

As Cole touched the hot spot on the graphic, then the repair symbol, the pulsing lights turned blue, indicating that the repair sequence had started. The graphic showed several modular robots moving along the conduits to perform the repairs. Cole let out a sigh of relief.

“It seems to be working.” He laughed. “We did it, kiddo.” He watched the panel for a few seconds as the modular repairs seemed to go quickly. “I think we circumvented the meltdown.” The cadmium rods may still be stuck, but it didn’t matter anymore. All they needed was a little time to get off the planet. He turned to face Rhonda. “No need to stay and watch. Now that the robots are activated, they’ll finish the job on their own. Let’s just get out of here.”

“Captain, watch out!”

A group of crazed prisoners surged through a crack in a wall, fifty meters away. He was right. They couldn’t trust the compads anymore. Cole fired an explosive salve and yelled “Run!”

He and Rhonda fled through the maze, taking as many turns as they could to shake their pursuers. Suddenly, after a sharp turn, Cole saw the path ahead blocked by a mountain of debris and stopped. Too late to turn back, the inmates followed too close.

Cole considered the high mound of protruding crimson pipes, broken pieces of duracrete, ripped duranium cell doors, metal toilets, duracrete benches, bed bunks and other objects. All these items didn’t happen to stack up by chance. The inmates had carefully built that barricade. Cole realized with dismay that they’d fallen into a trap.

The pursuing convicts yelled just around the corner, their heavy steps pounding the duracrete. From Cole’s previous phaser burst, they had to know he and Rhonda carried arms, but they didn’t seem to care. They knew they had the numbers on their side. Another thought made Cole uneasy. He’d recognized one of the prisoners leading the attack, the most dangerous Monack ever incarcerated. Tomar!

Cole stopped and faced about, imitated by Rhonda. Pale, she held her phaser at the ready.

Cole did the same, waiting for the rioters to show themselves around the bend so he could aim. He attempted a smile. “Since you seem to have religion, kiddo, now would be a good time to pray for both of us.”



## Chapter Four

### Level Nineteen - Crimson Zone

Rhonda saw the prisoners surging from the bend of the corridor. They rushed toward her and the Captain. She heard the sizzle of Riggeur's phaser and aimed, firing in rapid succession with perfect accuracy. Together they shot several prisoners, but many more came forth. They couldn't kill them fast enough. Rhonda started climbing the mount of debris, still firing. If only she could get to the other side, maybe she could escape them.

The Captain understood her intent. "Go for it, kiddo, I'll cover you."

"Don't stay there. Hurry up." Rhonda kept climbing while firing as best she could. Good thing the prisoners didn't have guns.

The Captain kept firing, too. "Go ahead. I'm staying."

"Are you crazy?" Rhonda couldn't believe he wanted to stay.

"If they get me, they'll leave you alone. If I follow you, they'll pursue us both." He sounded serious.

Her natural agility fueled by fear, Rhonda kept climbing the difficult barrier. "But without you, I'm stuck on this level because of the lockdown. And they will get me sooner or later." As she reached the very top of the rubble pile, the Captain still showed no signs of following her. Perched on the top ridge, Rhonda set her phaser on explode and aimed for the group of attackers to give the Captain a chance to get away.

The explosion created chaos among the inmates.

"Captain, hurry!" Without waiting for his response, heart beating wildly, Rhonda crested the barrier and started to climb down the other side. She could hear phaser fire and the screams of the psychotic inmates. Fortunately, none of them waited for her on the backside of the barricade, where the corridor stood empty.

On her way down, she realized the Captain hadn't even started to climb the barrier yet. She let herself slide, then her sleeve caught, and she hung, stuck. She had to get back up a notch and un-snag herself. When her feet finally touched the floor, she crouched, hiding behind the mound of metal and

debris. Squinting through a small crack in the barricade, she watched anxiously.

A swarm of inmates had overwhelmed Riggeur and beat him with fists, knees and feet. Each hit made Rhonda sick to her stomach. The Captain still fought and struggled within their grip, but there were too many convicts. They took away his phaser and compad.

Some of the inmates holding him drooled, others barked incomprehensible words. In Rhonda's medical opinion, these prisoners were quite psychotic and not in any condition to make rational decisions. Their sheer willingness to die to phaser fire indicated a total lack of judgment.

Why hadn't the silly Captain followed her up the barricade? Did he really let himself get captured to give her a chance to escape? Rhonda couldn't believe he would sacrifice himself to save her. It didn't seem logical.

Did he think her life mattered more than his? What a stupid noble thing to do. He'd acted like some ancient knight of the Middle Ages in her Earth History books. She couldn't help but admire his courage, but she found Cole Riggeur's heroism misplaced. His sacrifice didn't help her at all.

The inmates relented then brought the Captain in front of the man leading the prisoners. Suddenly the tall man's appearance changed. His skin turned the color of gray stone, with uneven ridges on his hairless face and elongated skull. Pointed fangs grew out of his teeth, and long claws stretched his bony fingers.

The monster laughed, a dry cynical sound. "Captain Riggeur, we meet again." The expression of hatred in the Monack's round eyes and his exulting tone made Rhonda think of personal vendetta.

From her hiding place behind the barricade, unseen and holding her breath, Rhonda watched with horror, as her Captain straightened up to face the Monack. But he said nothing. Could he even talk after such a beating?

The Monack gazed through the barricade as if he could see Rhonda.

Terrified, Rhonda didn't dare breathe. Had he seen her?"

The Monack sniffed the air and laughed. Then he motioned his goons to bring the Captain along and walked away with his gang.

Paralyzed by fear, Rhonda still didn't breathe as she watched the inmates pushing the Captain forward and dragging him behind their leader. Rhonda shivered, wondering what they would do to him. Insanely dangerous, that's what these convicts were.

Fortunately, they hadn't seen Rhonda. Either they'd forgotten about her in their state of withdrawal, or they seemed content enough to let her go, as long as they had their prize. The Captain had been right to believe that they would be satisfied with taking him. She wondered what kind of

connection he had with the shape-shifter. Evidently the Monack hated him and would surely kill him.

But Rhonda knew she couldn't just abandon Captain Riggeur to these derelicts. Besides, she could never make it to the surface on her own. She didn't have the code and she needed another guard's DNA to get through the locks. She had to find a way to rescue him.

She remained hidden until all the convicts and the Captain disappeared at the end of the corridor. Then she reluctantly turned away from the barricade and started in the opposite direction. Watching her compad, Rhonda fled toward a deserted block on the west side of Level Nineteen, all the while keeping track of the receding blue dot of Cole Riggeur on her device.

The Captain still traveled among the group of inmates, toward a populated section of the floor. Rhonda found an isolated cell in an empty section and dropped on the bunk bed.

The screen of her compad flickered. "Good God!" She had neglected to recharge the battery recently. This would never happen to the exemplary Captain Cole Riggeur. She'd bet her life that he charged his compad every night without fail, even though the charge could last two weeks.

The comimplant at her neck did not respond to her touch. Only static. Rhonda had no way of getting through to the control room. Hoping she still had enough juice in her compad to send out a distress message, she opened the channels to the rest of the Garrison, not knowing whether or not anyone could hear. She just had to try.

"Rhonda Alendresis, Level Nineteen, calling for help. Captain Cole Riggeur has been abducted by rioters. I escaped, but my compad is running out of battery. I'm hiding in the isolation cells on the west side of level Nineteen. If anyone can hear me, the Captain is in great danger and needs help."

Rhonda closed the compad to conserve the battery and leaned against the wall. She felt utterly alone. What was she doing here, marooned on a dying planet? And what could she do about Captain Cole Riggeur?

Certainly nothing in the manual had prepared her for that kind of situation. All the manual said in case of riots was lock down the affected floors. Nowhere did the safety of the guards prevail in the Duran manual. Only Captain Riggeur cared about his guards. Still, it hadn't prevented him from sacrificing Rhonda's life with his, in order to save the rest of the Garrison.

Anger rose in Rhonda's throat as she remembered how the Captain had ignored her warnings. He had to go down those hellish levels and take the time to lock down his precious prisoners. If the stubborn man had listened to her in the first place, they would both be back on the surface right now, figuring out a way off this condemned planet. Now it looked like they'd lost their chance of getting away with their lives. If the prisoners didn't kill them first, the planet would.

As if to answer her thoughts, a strong quake rattled the bars of the cell. Rhonda gripped the edge of the bolted bunk bed. On the high ceiling, pipes knocked and crashed down. A conflagration echoed nearby, probably a collapsing wall. Finally, the rumble receded and the empty block fell silent, except for the incessant humming of the machines.

Releasing the breath she had been holding, Rhonda dropped her head into her hands. Tears of frustration dripped through her fingers. How was she ever going to get her Captain back? Wiping the tears, she straightened her spine and assessed her situation. Bad as it was, she was whole and just had to collect her thoughts. She must come up with a rescue plan.

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The blow split Cole's brow and pain exploded through his cranium, but he bit back a cynical comment. Tied with strips of cloth to a bolted bench inside an open cell, he felt in no position to anger the shape-shifter any further. Better to not react and remain calm and neutral.

Tomar's leathery smile bared gray fangs as he loomed above Cole's face like a gargoyle. Cold anger filled the Monack's dark eyes. "Tell me what I want to know, Rigueur." The emergency lights flickered, making the cell look dingy. Dark shadows outlined the protruding ridges of the shape-shifter's forehead.

A bitter smile cracked Cole's swollen lips. "You might as well kill me now, Tomar. You know I'll never give you the security code. You are locked down in this pit and will never see the light of day again."

Tomar growled. "Too bad I can't kill you... yet. I need your fresh DNA to get past the security locks. But as long as you live, I can make you suffer."

"How in hell did you get the cells open all the way up to Level Sixteen?" Cole knew the doors couldn't have opened by themselves. The default security programs prevented it. To insure the safety of the Garrison, Cole needed to know where the facility's weaknesses lay.

Tomar hovered close, too close, and the sweet sickening smell of the Monack filled Cole's nostrils. Tomar applied a dagger-sharp claw to the microfiber kevlar shoulder of Cole's uniform. "I'm the one asking the questions here." The Monack pushed down on his claws as if to puncture the jacket, which resisted. Tomar looked surprised. "You have made a few improvements to the uniform since the last time we met... Very clever."

Cole remembered their last meeting with dreadful clarity and refrained from shuddering. He'd

seen the extreme cruelty with which Tomar punished those who refused to obey him. Cole knew what the shape-shifter was capable of and would gladly give his life to prevent future carnage. “Believe me, you won’t get past the lockdown. It’s foolproof.”

Tomar kicked the titanium bars and the metallic sound reverberated throughout the block. “Nothing is foolproof, Riggeur. Not when humans are involved. You are forgetting the human factor. And in this case, you are the weak link. I’ll guarantee you that I’ll make you talk.”

Cole thought Tomar could do little, besides torturing him until death. “Or what?”

The gargoyle grinned. “Or I will go after that woman guard and flay her skin bit by bit in front of you until you break.”

*Damn!* Cole hadn’t considered that possibility. He fiercely hoped Rhonda could elude Tomar’s goons with the help of her compad locator. “I couldn’t care less about the Alendresis bitch. She means nothing to me.”

“Really?” Tomar waved Cole’s compad in front of his face. “How do I find her with this?”

“You can’t.” Cole knew Tomar wouldn’t believe his lie, but he could think of nothing smarter to say at the moment. His head felt like it might explode.

The shape-shifter screeched. Two inmates rushed into the open cell. “Take off his uniform,” Tomar ordered with a hint of eagerness.

The convicts opened the top front of Cole’s uniform and slid it as far back as they could without untying him, then they ripped open his undershirt.

Cole wondered how long he could hold off the rioters. Although willing to die for the safety of his crew, he knew he couldn’t possibly withstand a woman’s torture, more importantly a woman of the Garrison.

But who was he kidding? It was not just any guard, it was Rhonda the monster threatened to torment. Cole couldn’t stand it if anything happened to her. Despite all their differences, he admired Rhonda and respected the way she stood up for her beliefs.

Tomar leaned over Cole and poised his spiked claws over the exposed flesh below his right shoulder. “Should I?”

“Knock yourself out.” Cole knew he couldn’t stop the ruthless Monack.

Tomar dug deep and Cole felt the razor claws slice through his upper chest. Sharp pain shot through his right shoulder and he screamed. His long mournful cry pierced his ears, as if it had come from someone else’s throat.

Slowly, Tomar withdrew his clawed fingers from Cole’s wound and licked the blood dripping

from them with relish. More blood poured out of the gaping punctures.

“If you tell me what I want to hear, I’ll let you and that bitch of yours live.” Tomar dipped his claws in the oozing blood and licked them again. “But if you don’t, I’ll thoroughly enjoy the taste of your flesh and hers. Guards are exceptionally healthy, a true delicacy.”

As more blood pulsed out of his wound, Cole wondered how long he would survive this ordeal. Above all, he hoped Rhonda would stay safely away from these vicious criminals. The cell around him started to spin. Cole felt himself fall into a bottomless black hole then he lost consciousness.

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In the temporary safety of her isolated cell, Rhonda struggled to think. From her compad she knew where the rioters held Captain Riggeur and she must use that advantage. She would wait until she had a clear path and few inmates surrounded him.

Unfortunately, she had to conserve her battery charge and could only allow herself to check her compad every two hours or so. She hoped as the hours passed that the rioters would get tired and settle down to sleep, as much as the symptoms of Styx withdrawal would allow them.

Now Rhonda knew with certainty that she had to rescue the reckless foolish man. Unfortunately, she still had no idea how to do it, other than barging in with blazing phaser.

Since she’d checked her compad only an hour ago, Rhonda had to restrain herself from checking it again. She should get some rest, but her busy mind didn’t allow her that luxury. Instead, she ate a meal bar from her pants pockets. She’d always wondered why the rule forced the guards to carry meal bars at all times, but now she understood the reason behind it. At least, her strength would not wane.

“Miss Alendresis!” The whispered voice sounded familiar. Could it be?

Rhonda picked up her phaser and was about to turn on her compad to check on the Captain’s position when he appeared smiling at the entrance of her open cell. “I escaped while they slept.”

Rhonda wondered at the formal address. The Captain usually called her by her first name. “Am I glad to see you! How did you get away?”

“I’ll explain later. We better get out of here. They will be looking for me soon.”

Relief washed over Rhonda, and she couldn’t help the wide smile hanging on her face. She holstered her phaser. “Captain, are you all right?” Bemused by his unruffled demeanor, freshly shaven face and impeccable hair, she didn’t comment on it. Even his bruises seemed to have faded in the dim light. Count on the Captain to use a cell facility to freshen up in times of crisis. Rhonda berated herself

for not doing the same. “I was so worried about you.”

“Never worry about me, Miss Alendresis. I can take care of myself.”

“I guess you can.” He’d called her Miss again. Had the shock of being abducted altered his mind?

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Right.” Rhonda felt much better. “My compad is out of battery. We should use yours.”

“Good.” He gave her the most congenial smile. “I’ll lead the way.”

Rhonda marveled at the fact that the Captain didn’t berate her about letting her battery go out. She was at fault and expected a sharp comment on her laxity with the rules, but she felt grateful for that unexpected leniency.

The Captain’s fingers seemed to fumble with the keys of his compad then he motioned for her to follow and started at a fast pace. What had happened to him? He seemed different somehow, surprisingly accommodating. As a matter of fact, he hadn’t used his patronizing tone or called her kiddo once since he came back.

As they walked quickly toward the closest stairwell, Rhonda gave in to curiosity. “How come the Monack knew your name?”

“It is a long story. I am the one who brought him in twelve years ago,” he said emphatically.

“Really? And he remembered your name after twelve years?”

“There is more to the story.” But the Captain didn’t seem in the mood to talk anymore.

“Please indulge me. Looks like we have plenty of time. What did he do?”

“A proud Monack, Tomar is very intelligent and brave.” Surprisingly, there seemed to be great respect for the Monack in the Captain’s words. “He challenged and killed every dominant male in his tribe in honorable combat, giving them a chance to fight back and reclaim the leadership he’d taken. Of course, as the strongest, he won.”

“That’s not why he remembers you, though, is it?”

“No.” The Captain smiled. “Tomar escaped as we were taking him to the transport for Zurin Five.”

“Really?” Rhonda wondered about the shift in the Captain’s attitude since this morning. Why hadn’t he mentioned the Monack in their previous conversations on the subject of escapes? “How did he fool you of all people?”

The Captain snickered as if he didn’t want to tell her then smiled. He decidedly behaved in a strangely agreeable manner. “Tomar overpowered two guards then killed them and ran away. We

chased him for three days all over his home planet, but he kept changing shape, so we never knew who or what to look for.”

“What happened?”

“He would have eluded us if a member of his tribe hadn’t betrayed him.” Was it anger in the Captain’s words?

“Another shape-shifter sold him out?”

“Tomar had enemies. I still do not understand why his people had him sequestered. The loss of lives was a small price to pay to preserve the Old Way, the true way, where one ruled through strength alone.”

Shocked, Rhonda didn’t know what to think. “How did you finally catch him?”

“The traitor was a female, one of Tomar’s wives. Monacks can recognize each other even in different shapes and she recognized him. We... Unlike humans, Monacks have a very sharp sense of smell.”

Had he said ‘we?’ A terrifying thought came to Rhonda’s mind, but if what she suspected was right, she had to keep on pretending. “His wife must have wanted him caught really bad.”

The Captain seemed to relish the conversation. “His wife didn’t understand why he killed every male who challenged his authority, even his own son.”

“His own son? Neither would I.” Rhonda glanced at the Captain, looking for one more clue to confirm her terrifying suspicions.

“Tomar really didn’t break any law according to the ancient Monack code. He still values the old ways of his people, and only acted as he should. He is not a criminal and doesn’t belong here.”

The last comment verified Rhonda’s worst fears. Even if he had lost his sanity, the Captain would never say that. “How many people did Tomar kill?”

“Over two hundred.”

Rhonda had to refrain from reacting. It was so shocking that she fell silent. The horrendous reality imposed itself on Rhonda’s mind. This was not the Captain. And since he looked and sounded like him, it could only be a shape-shifter. But a shape-shifter couldn’t mimic the Captain’s DNA, and here came the final test as they reached the stairwell door.

When the Captain raised his hand to press it to the scanner, Rhonda noticed fresh blood on his fingers. She laid her hand on her side of the door and motioned to his hand. “You are bleeding. Did the convicts hurt you?”

As the door chimed, in acceptance of both guards’ DNA, the Captain shook his head. “I had to



kill someone to escape. Must be his blood. Why don't you enter the code yourself?"

Stunned that the scanner had accepted the Captain's DNA, Rhonda wondered about the blood. Her mind reeled as she realized with horror that it had to be Cole Riggeur's blood on the shape-shifter's hand. Her Captain would be wounded, severely wounded maybe, but she refused to assume the worst.

The pretender, however, had given Rhonda one more reason to doubt his identity. She did not have the code to open the door, and the real Captain knew it. Now it all made sense. Besides, a perfectly groomed Captain wouldn't keep blood on his hands, and a bloody kill would have stained his uniform. Didn't the creature just mention earlier that shape-shifters couldn't reproduce scent?

As he brushed past her, Rhonda sniffed him discreetly. He smelled sickeningly sweet, and something else she couldn't identify. No trace of the mossy fragrance that had permeated the Captain's body this morning. Even after freshening up, he couldn't have erased that scent. The smell would still cling to the uniform. So much for the human's impaired sense of smell.

Rhonda forced a casual smile. "While I open the door, make sure we do not get disturbed. Go watch for those thugs."

The strange Captain did not move. "Let me observe you to make sure you have the code right."

Rhonda waved him away. "You can watch once we are inside the stairwell, when I open the next door. It will be safer. Right now I need you to keep your eyes on the corridor and on your compad." As he still didn't move, she added with authority, "Go on! I need to concentrate."

"Right." Reluctantly, the fake Captain walked a few steps away and pored over his compad.

The only physical fool-proof way for Rhonda to confirm that this man wasn't her Captain was to use her exhausted com pad. She turned her back to her strange companion and covered the door security panel with her body then she discreetly took out her com pad and turned it on. The device flickered and Rhonda could see the blue dot of Captain Riggeur at the opposite end of the floor, among the rioters. The dot next to her pulsed red. Definitely a shape-shifter!

Cold sweat moistened her palms and fear threatened to paralyze Rhonda, but she took a calming breath as she discreetly hung the compad back on her belt. She had to deal with this situation intelligently. Monacks were quick and deadly. She may not be able to kill him by surprise, so she must use her brain and beat him at his own game.

"Captain, the door is stuck. The security code doesn't work."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain. Must be the tremors. It's stuck just like the elevator doors. We have to try another stairwell."

“All right.” The impostor consulted his compad. “This way.”

Captain Riggeur would never trust her and would have insisted to try the code himself. Rhonda concluded that the Monack hadn’t discovered the code in the Captain’s compad and subtly attempted to get it from her. As long as he believed she had the code, she could lead him on.

As she followed the impostor through the labyrinth of cell-lined corridors, Rhonda felt tempted to shoot him in the back. Did she have time to draw her phaser and set it on kill before he heard it and reacted to her move? Rhonda pondered that, if the Monack didn’t understand the relationship between Rhonda and her Captain, she could also play that card to get rid of him and escape, but how?

First, she must get the Captain’s compad away from the shape-shifter. She needed that working compad, it contained the lockdown code. Besides, if she didn’t get it back, the Monack and his goons could find her wherever she fled.

Could she switch the compads? Give the imposter the useless pad that would only last a few minutes and appropriate the one in perfect working order? How would she manage to do it without arousing suspicion? It seemed too risky. If the Monack suspected she had unmasked him, she would be powerless against his superior skills and strength.

Still, Rhonda had to make a decision before they reached the next set of stairs. Resolutely, she drew her phaser and set it on kill, but as she pressed the trigger, a violent tremor shook the corridor. Her phaser beam hit the ceiling. Ruptured pipes came falling down in a downpour of vile smelling water. Cell bars fell toward her, and she ducked and side-stepped.

As the floor shook and rolled under her feet, Rhonda fell on her back, and in a blur she saw the shape-shifter phasing in and out of the Captain’s shape. The Monack turned to face her. Realizing that she had witnessed his unexpected shift, he retrieved his native shape and staggered toward her, pointing his phaser.

Shaking off the fuzziness caused by her fall, Rhonda sat up and shot without aiming. As the ground shook, the shape-shifter slipped on the wet floor. He lost his balance and fell. His head bashed the hard floor, then a heavy block of duracrete fell on his head. But Rhonda knew the Monack physiology made them extremely resistant to any kind of injury. She shot Tomar as he lay inert on the floor.

When the tremor faded and ceased, Rhonda stood up and crouched by the shape-shifter’s side to check his pulse but found none. Duh! She almost laughed at herself for being such a creature of habit. There wouldn’t be a pulse in any case. Monacks had no heart.

Quickly, Rhonda snatched his belt with the phaser and compad. The pad seemed to work. She

hoped her phaser discharge hadn't affected the batteries or the memory. She also snatched the dagger in his boot and found a strange blade in the other. Looking closely at the uniform, Rhonda realized it wasn't made of Kevlar microfiber. These weren't the Captain's clothes, just more shape-shifter tricks.

The Monack looked dead but Rhonda had no way of confirming it. Just to make sure, she walked back a few steps and shot him once more, then, after reflection, a fourth time.

Satisfied, Rhonda followed the floor plans on the Captain's pad and ran toward another deserted block where she wouldn't be so exposed. As she stopped to catch her breath, she observed the blue pulsing dot of Captain Riggeur, still on the east side, only five hundred meters away through the maze and surrounded by about forty inmates.

The main population of Level Nineteen seemed to have migrated toward the southern section. Probably undamaged food dispensers or intact fresh water lines made that area more attractive to them.

How in God's name would Rhonda manage to save the Captain by herself, especially if he was wounded? She suddenly realized that beyond the fact that she needed him in order to get back to the surface, she cared very much about what happened to Captain Cole Riggeur. Despite his uncompromising adherence to the rules, he'd saved her life twice. He'd even been right about enforcing the dress code. She understood that now.

Rhonda found herself missing his company. The very thought of his possible demise raised the small hairs of her nape, but she quickly set her fears aside. She refused to believe that the Captain was dead. Such a foolishly courageous man deserved to live. Could there be more devotion than duty commanded in her feelings for him?

If she ever wanted to find out, she had to get him away from these derelicts, but for now Rhonda had no strength left. She must catch a few hours of sleep before attempting a rescue or she would certainly fail.

## Chapter Five

### Level Nineteen - Crimson Zone

Armed with two phasers, a dagger in each boot, a curved blade at her belt, and a functioning compad, Rhonda felt confident enough to attempt a one-woman rescue. While checking the compad, she ate one more energy bar before setting out. The red dot of the Monack she had shot earlier had not moved, confirming that she'd effectively killed him.

The Captain's compad she'd retrieved from the shape-shifter showed only six red dots in the cells around Cole Riggeur. The other rioters seemed to be exploring various corridors, probably in search of their dead leader. Seizing the opportunity, Rhonda set out toward the block where the inmates held her Captain. She wondered how Tomar had collected his blood and prayed Cole Riggeur wasn't too badly injured to fight his way out alongside her.

A red dot on the compad barred her path to the corridor where the inmates kept Riggeur. Probably a lookout man. Was he armed? With what? No matter, Rhonda had to get through without alerting the whole gang. Hiding behind the corner wall at the intersection of the two corridors, she peered and saw the sentry. She had to distract him. Picking up a pebble from a heap of crumbled concrete, she threw it high over the man's head. When it landed far behind him, the sentry turned his back to investigate.

As she'd practiced on dummies many times in combat training, Rhonda quickly snuck behind him and snapped his neck. The sound sickened her, but Rhonda steeled herself against her natural pity. As the sentry slid gently down against her, she caught the pipe he held to prevent it from clattering to the hard floor. She didn't want to signal her presence.

Advancing silently along the empty corridor, Rhonda approached the corner of the maze where Riggeur's blue dot had not moved in hours. Refusing to admit the possibility of his death, she assumed the rioters had tied him up.

The rumble of an aftershock echoed in the vast space above the cells and pipes rattled on the high ceiling. Instinctively, Rhonda ducked into one of the empty cells lining both sides of the corridor, where the duranium bars capping the top of the cell would protect her from the crash of overhead pipes,

but none fell. Minor aftershock. So she resumed her stealthy approach on the Captain's blue dot.

One inmate came out of a neighboring cell, eyes red from lack of sleep or drug. When he spotted Rhonda, the madness in his round eyes changed to lust. The man yelled as he charged. Rhonda drew her phaser and fired, but he kept coming, so she set it on kill and fired again. The crazed man collapsed at her feet.

More inmates, attracted by the commotion, poured out of the open cells and rushed toward Rhonda. Adrenalin pumping, she shot the closest one, a fat hairy man. But three more closed upon her.

Remembering the pipe in her hand, Rhonda hit a skinny convict in the head. She kicked an older man in the groin, then grabbed a third inmate and threw him hard. His head hit the floor with a loud thud. Cranial fracture for sure. When had Rhonda regressed from healer to killer? But she couldn't think of that now.

Heart pounding, moving swiftly before more aggressors appeared, Rhonda reached the Captain's cell. Her breath caught. The Captain sat alone on a bolted bench, hands and feet tied. To her relief, his shallow breathing proved him alive.

At first glimpse he looked asleep, head down on his chest, but Rhonda realized with alarm that if he had not awakened at the commotion, he must be unconscious. From the crimson stain on his right upper chest, she realized he'd lost a great deal of blood. Even now, she didn't want to consider the possibility that he might not make it.

She shook him gently. "Captain, wake up. We have to get out of here."

No reaction. She took his pulse. Weak but regular. She'd never seen Cole Riggeur in such a vulnerable state and realized she couldn't stand the thought. She knelt and set her phaser on the floor to untie the red strips of cloth binding the Captain's feet.

At a sound, she turned to see two convicts barging into the cell. A hulking Juzzaar with pale gold skin and dark glasses preceded a humanoid with yellowish reptilian scales instead of skin. A Karatzin!

Snatching the phaser off the floor, Rhonda shot the Juzzaar, but even with her phaser on kill, she knew he was too bulky to fall. She shot him several times before he dropped, then as she aimed for the Karatzin, the reptilian's skin exuded a puff of yellowish vapor.

Too late. As the Karatzin fell, Rhonda realized that she'd inhaled some of the toxic substance. The emanation constituted part of the Karatzins' natural defenses. Already a lethargy spread to Rhonda's legs. Holding her breath, she could hear more inmates coming her way, and those she had knocked out started to awaken.

Glancing at the Captain with regret, Rhonda wanted to apologize for not taking him with her. “I’ll be back,” she managed to whisper, hoping he could hear her. “I’m sorry,” she added, needing to hear herself say it.

Rhonda struggled to her feet and started to run clumsily. That’s all her sluggish body would allow. Her shooting became sloppy but she retreated behind a broken wall section. Setting her phaser on explode, she emptied the blast in the midst of her pursuers and ran, but her pace felt slow.

After several turns, out of sight of her pursuers, Rhonda realized her eyes could not focus on the compad. She had a difficult time reading the floor plans. When she turned into a nook of the maze, she hid and let her pursuers run ahead while she devised her escape route. Her head pounded in irregular bursts, clattering like a bowling alley on tournament day. She needed to find a safe place to hide while she recovered from the Karatzin’s poison.

Taking a new path toward the abandoned west side of the crimson floor, Rhonda finally reached the relative safety of an isolated cell in a deserted block of the labyrinth. She needed a drink to flush the poison out of her body. She uncorked her canteen and tipped it to her lips. No water left. When she tried the cell’s faucet, it had run dry... broken waterlines.

Exhausted, Rhonda realized she would have to wait out the effect of the venom. After making sure no inmate roamed anywhere near her area, she collapsed on the bunk bed. She fought the urge to sleep but felt herself slipping into unconsciousness.

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A gentle shake brought Rhonda back from sleep. Cursing the headache that threatened to explode her skull, she felt parched. The worst hangover ever. She welcomed the canteen raised to her lips and drank deeply, feeling the water soothe her dry throat.

Blinking in the dim light, she forced her eyes to focus and smiled as she recognized the dark liquid eyes of the female guard in gray uniform bent over the bunk bed. Xerna, cool and collected as always, held the canteen to Rhonda’s lips. Her partner, Javel, a bright boyish man who never seemed concerned about anything, leaned casually against the red-striped wall.

Pushing the canteen away, Rhonda sat up suddenly and regretted the fast move that sent needles stabbing her brain. She tried to ignore the discomfort as she drew her phaser and poised it in the direction of the two gray-clad guards. “Step back!” she ordered, with an authority she didn’t feel.

Xerna raised one eyebrow and retreated slowly. “Are you all right, Rhonda?”

“Fool me twice, shame on me.” Rhonda fumbled with her compad. “How do I know you are not shape-shifters?”

Javel peeled himself off the wall and stepped forward with a strained smile. When Rhonda raised the muzzle of her phaser, he stopped, holding both hands up in entreaty. “All right, whatever you say.”

Wrong compad. No battery. Rhonda threw it to the dark crimson floor in frustration then pulled out the Captain’s compad. “How did you get here? How did you find me?” She held the device upside down and had to flip it.

Xerna never lost her cool demeanor. “We intercepted your call for help, saying Riggeur was held captive.”

Javel seemed to enjoy the situation a little too much. “Xerna knows this facility from top to bottom.” He looked proud of his partner. “Even with the Captain’s code, it took us longer than we thought. Delays...”

“How long has it been?” Rhonda worried about the Captain. She’d lost track of time. Had she left him to die?

“Ask Xerna. She has a computer instead of a brain.” He winked. “And maybe instead of a heart as well.”

Wondering at that last comment, Rhonda finally detected the three blue dots representing her and the two other guards on her compad. She sighed with relief. “Sorry, guys. One of the shape-shifters almost fooled me by impersonating the Captain. He smelled wrong, though. I killed him. Had to shoot him four times.”

Xerna nodded. “Don’t worry. I understand your distrust.” She offered more water. “What happened to you?”

“Karatzin poison. Just a trace, fortunately.” As she refused more of the precious liquid, Rhonda realized how disheveled she must look to elicit such pity. And she felt even worse. “I think I’ll survive.”

Javel chuckled. “You were lucky. Since the worst is over, it will pass.”

“I hope so.” Rhonda vaguely remembered that Javel had mixed Karatzin blood, and so did Xerna. No wonder they remained so cool. But Javel’s cavalier attitude didn’t fit the gravity of their predicament. Rhonda holstered her phaser and pushed back unruly hair. She’d lost the red scarf in the scuffle.

Xerna recapped her canteen and sat next to her on the bunk. “So, how much do you know about

the Captain's condition?"

The memory of Cole Riggeur unconscious on his bench pierced Rhonda like a spear. "They keep him on the east side. He's gravely wounded." She hoped her steady professional tone masked how much she cared. "We have to get him out of there fast, or he won't make it. He's lost a lot of blood." On her compad, Rhonda showed Xerna the cell where his blue dot pulsed, surrounded by a dozen inmates.

Xerna gave her a sidelong glance. "Are you sure you feel up to a rescue right now?"

Shaking her head slowly, Rhonda said, "I have to be. The Captain doesn't have much time."

Xerna pointed to Rhonda's empty canteen abandoned on the bed. "Take it with you. We'll refill it when we find clean water."

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Tomar awoke from a foggy nightmare with a terrible feeling of helplessness. All his nerves seemed asleep and he vaguely remembered the tremor shaking the corridor, the pipes plummeting from the ceiling, and the pain, compounded by phaser fire. He still couldn't move, but his body had regenerated enough for him to regain consciousness. At least he could think.

He thanked the fact that Monacks had no heart or central nervous system. It made them impervious to most killing methods. Each cell of Tomar's body functioned independently from the others and could regenerate quickly, as long as all the parts remained connected and some cells still lived.

More resilient than most Monacks, Tomar had survived many killing blows. That's what made him a hero of the Old Ways. He'd defeated and killed hundreds, then quartered and devoured his victims to inherit their fighting abilities and prevent their regeneration. After he escaped Zurin Five, Tomar would reclaim his right to rule his native planet.

As feeling and senses gradually returned to him, Tomar remembered hearing the echoes of a commotion, but it seemed faraway. Could he have dreamt it? Slowly, he liquified his head and reformed it next to the block of concrete that had smashed it. He lay face up on the hard floor of Level Nineteen, according to the crimson stripes running along the walls, ceiling and floor. He sat up and moved his limbs to test his motor functions, the memory of his encounter with the female guard returned. Miss Alendresis. Had a human female thwarted him? No. It couldn't be.

His Monack pride refused to accept defeat by a human, even less a female. Tomar hated smart



women and swore this one would die slowly at his hand. His honor demanded she be sacrificed in the bloodiest fashion to the Gods of the Old Ways. Besides, by devouring her heart, he would inherit her cunning.

Where was she? How long had Tomar remained unconscious? He realized the vixen had retrieved the weapons and the compad he'd stolen from Riggeur to impersonate him. Furious with himself, Tomar decided he'd kill Riggeur first and store some of his blood for his DNA. He'd then lead a search for Miss Rhonda Alendresis and would enjoy making her scream as she gave him the code so he could escape. As long as Tomar lived, no human female would ever claim to have bested a male Monack.

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Rhonda stopped a hundred meters from the Captain's cell and checked her compad. She wished she could talk to Javel and Xerna who took their positions at the other end of the corridor, but communications weren't working even at such close range. On the compad, the blue dots of Javel and Xerna seemed in place, ready to attack. The blue dot representing the Captain was surrounded by a small group of convicts. Other inmates occupied neighboring cells.

Watching the clock on her pad, Rhonda waited a few seconds then came out of hiding. Firing non-stop with both phasers, she advanced like an automaton. She could hear the phase fire of Javel and Xerna who emerged from the other end of the corridor.

Clearing her path with phaser discharge, Rhonda especially watched for hulking Juzzaars and scaly Karatzins. She repressed her pity for anyone cowering or hiding inside the cells on each side of the corridor. If she spared the cowards, she knew they would attack her from behind as soon as she moved on. The thought that they'd tortured the Captain fueled her rage, and if they'd killed him already, she would come back and exterminate the vermin to the last.

The smell of burnt flesh covered the stench of unwashed bodies. Maybe Rhonda didn't smell so good herself but couldn't care less. The convicts still alive screamed over the whizzing of phase fire.

This time, Rhonda wouldn't fail. Although she shuddered at what she had become, she wouldn't abandon a remarkable man like the Captain to these filthy derelicts. Cole Riggeur might be a pain in the neck most times, but he had given himself up to let her escape. Few human beings showed that kind of compassion. Certainly no one had ever risked death for Rhonda before. The least she could do was return the favor.

As she remembered that the Captain must have breathed some Karatzin poison as well during her botched rescue attempt, Rhonda wondered how it had affected him in his weakened condition. Stepping over dead bodies, she reached the cell at the same time as Javel and Xerna. The couple stood on each side of the open door while Rhonda went inside.

The Captain didn't move, probably unconscious. God she hoped he was still alive. He looked deathly pale around the ugly bruises on his jaw and brow. The bodies of the big Juzzaar and the Karatzin she'd killed earlier still lay on the floor beside him.

Rhonda kicked aside the Karatzin's dead arm and laid a light hand on Cole Riggeur's shoulder. "Captain?"

He raised his head. He was alive! A sheen of sweat covered his forehead. The deep blue eyes looked faded and shone with fever as they lit up with surprise. A faint smile curled the corners of his mouth. "I thought you'd never come, kiddo." His breathing sounded shallow. "Not bad for a rookie."

Elated, Rhonda couldn't help but glow at the compliment. Despite the patronizing term, it sounded rather kind. "Time to get you out of here."

Aware of Xerna and Javel in the corridor firing phasers at oncoming inmates, Rhonda knelt before the Captain and pulled out her knife. She cut the strips of red fabric binding his feet to the foot of the bench, then his hands in the back. She readjusted the top of his open uniform then closed it to cover the dreadful stain of partially dried blood and his torn undershirt. "Can you stand?"

"Possibly." The Captain gripped Rhonda's arm for support.

Rhonda wedged her shoulder under his and realized he needed more help. "Javel? I need you."

Javel stepped into the cell and lifted the Captain's other shoulder with ease.

Outside the door, Xerna glanced at her compad and motioned to them. "More are coming. Hurry! This way." She went ahead.

Ignoring the few convicts running away from the guards, Rhonda and Javel followed, supporting or rather carrying the Captain as fast as they could through empty corridors lined with vacant cells. Xerna did a good job of avoiding wandering inmates. After several turns, now far enough from potential pursuers, they slowed the pace.

"We need to stop so I can look at him." Rhonda didn't like what she'd seen of the Captain's wound.

"Not here." Xerna guided them toward a deserted block.

Rhonda feared for the Captain. This flight across long blocks of cells couldn't possibly be good for him. Finally, Xerna slowed her run.

“What about here?” Rhonda didn’t want to wait any longer.

When Xerna nodded and entered one of the many empty cells, Rhonda followed and, with Javel’s help, laid the Captain on a bunk. He looked in bad shape.

Opening the top of the Captain’s uniform, Rhonda pulled aside the remnants of his torn shirt to take a look at his injury. The sight of his muscled torso reminded her of the Adonis she had seen in his bathroom, eons ago it seemed. She willed away the memory to focus on the ugly purple wound.

The jolts of their desperate run had prompted a flow of fresh blood. “At least, the bleeding might prevent the wound from festering.” She tried to sound optimistic for the Captain’s sake. She knew even critical patients could hear and understand what people said around them.

Pulling a sterile pack out of one of her cargo pockets, Rhonda ripped the wrapping and stuffed the medicated dressing as hard as she could against the open wounds to staunch the blood. She unfolded the patch of surgical tape to secure the pack into place. “I hope this stops the external bleeding and prevents infection, but the wound goes deep. I’m afraid there is internal damage.”

The Captain smiled feebly. “You are doing good, kiddo. Keep it up and you might make a great prison guard someday... Except for that hair.”

“Right.” Despite the comment, Rhonda rejoiced at his returning verve. Out of her pocket kit she took a roll of gauze and fashioned a sling to support the Captain’s right arm. Then she pulled out a pill of antibiotics and turned to Xerna. “You still have water?”

Xerna stared as she handed the canteen. “You carry that kind of stuff with you at all times?”

“Yep.” Rhonda helped the Captain swallow the pill and drink. Then she closed the uniform and adjusted the sling. “It’s regulation for the Garrison medic.” For once, she felt grateful she’d followed the rules.

Javel loomed over them, blocking the dim light. “He looks almost decent. Can he travel? We can’t stay here.”

“I know a shortcut,” Xerna stated, matter-of-fact. She sized up Javel coyly. “But you may not have the guts for it.”

Any shortcut sounded good to Rhonda. “Where is it?”

Xerna looked smug. “It’s a maintenance tunnel linked to the mines. One shaft leads all the way to the surface. At least it used to. It’s not charted in the floor plan of the complex.”

“Why not?” It seemed to Rhonda like a serious oversight.

“Duran dug these shafts only a few years ago, part of the mining operations,” Javel chimed in, like a kid showing off. He reached for Xerna’s shoulder. “You used those tunnels before, didn’t you?”

Anger flashed in Xerna's intense eyes as she pulled away from him. "So, what if I did?" She fixed her gaze upon Rhonda. "The deep mineshaft is sloped at an oblique and hard to climb." She motioned toward the Captain with her chin. "I'm worried it might be too arduous for him."

Rhonda also had serious reservations about Cole Riggeur's ability to walk, uphill. He'd closed his eyes and seemed oblivious to the conversation. She also wondered what went on between Javel and Xerna, but she had no time to ponder that mystery.

To her surprise, the Captain sat up on the bed. "It's our best chance. We've got to try it."

At the Captain's prompting, Rhonda helped him to turn sideways, elated at his newfound strength and show of authority. She grinned as hope filled her with good spirits.

Cole Riggeur grimaced and let his legs dangle to the floor. "Lead the way, Xerna."

## Chapter Six

### Level Nineteen - Crimson Zone

Determined to finish off Riggeur, Tomar finally reached the corridor that served as his headquarters. A dozen of his best fighters lay dead, sprawled on the crimson floor. Tomar turned one over with his foot. No blood.

When he entered the cell where he had tied Riggeur, the bench stood empty. The miserable human had escaped. He would find Captain Riggeur who had dared capture him once, and he would make him pay.

But how could Riggeur have escaped in his condition? The big Juzzaar and the Karatzin lay on the cell floor, dead. The use of phasers indicated Riggeur had been rescued. The smell of charred flesh and the black phaser burns on the faded red overalls told the story.

Cheated of his revenge on Riggeur, Tomar pounded the titanium bars and emitted a strident hunting cry that echoed on the walls and the network of conduits lining the high ceiling of Level Nineteen. In his rage, Tomar kicked and something went flying. Something light and red. Tomar picked up the flimsy thing.

A scarf! It reeked of the Alendresis woman guard. Could she have liberated Riggeur by herself? Probably not. She must have called other guards. Riggeur and the Alendresis woman would die slowly under his bloody claws, and soon. Tomar stuffed the scarf in the breast pocket of his red overalls.

Sniffing the air around him, he could detect the faint traces of Rhonda Alendresis' scent, as well as Captain Riggeur's. But he also detected two other human scents that used fragrance, or fancy soap... Or were they Karatzin? Mixed Karatzin guards? One male. Tomar detected the subtle hormonal secretions of the other half-Karatzin guard. The female was in heat.

This would complicate matters. The scaly bastards rivaled the Monacks for the deadliest species in this galaxy. You couldn't sneak up on the cold-blooded sun-seekers, and they possessed powerful close range defenses.

But the fact that other guards had come to Level Nineteen, pleased Tomar. It would increase his chances to acquire the code. Riggeur hadn't cracked, but Tomar could convince one of the other guards

to talk. Each extra guard provided one more opportunity to obtain the code, along with samples of their DNA.

A timid cough behind him made Tomar face about. Gramps, the grizzled engineer who had unlocked the doors that morning emerged from a cell.

“What happened here?” Tomar asked gruffly. “Where are the others?”

“There are four grays now, Fierce Leader.” Gramps sniffled.

“Grays?” Gramps meant guards, of course. Tomar enjoyed the epithet of Fierce Leader, though. It fit him well. “Four guards you said?”

“Two males, two females.”

“Where is the rest of our gang?”

“Most of them went to reconnoiter and find the location of the stairs, since the elevators are obviously out of order and even I can’t open them. Right after they left, the guards attacked with blazing phasers. I hid, of course.”

“Of course.” Any coward would. But Tomar had much to ponder. “They must have kept an eye on us and Riggeur with their locating devices. We’ve got to get rid of our implanted locator chips if we want to take them by surprise.”

Gramps smiled fearfully. “How?”

“I have handy sharp claws, don’t I?” Tomar smiled menacingly. “I can perform the extraction myself.” He enjoyed scaring human vermin.

“What about infection?” Gramps looked scared. A nervous tic contracted the corner of his mouth. “I heard Monack claws carried a disease deadly to humans.”

“The disease won’t kill you right away. We’ll just have to find an infirmary on our way up to sanitize the wound.”

“Right...” Gramps didn’t seem convinced. “I’d rather wait until we find the infirmary before letting you cut the skin of my back.”

“This is not an acceptable option. If the guards can see us on their scanners, we’ll never get close to them. And if they leave this level before we catch up with them, we’ll be trapped here, with no way of escape.”

To illustrate his confidence in his method, Tomar softened his neck and turned his head one hundred and eighty degrees, to look down at his back. He reversed the joints of his shoulders and elbows so he could easily reach, then he incised the skin of his back with his claw and cut out a neat square of flesh around the chip implant. Slowly, he extracted the small device then smiled. “Nothing to

it.”

As some blue gel oozed from the wound, he mentally changed shape to close the hole and stop the leak. The skin of his back smoothed instantly. The independent cells of his body had started the healing process.

Tomar turned to skinny Gramps who looked even paler than usual. “Show me your back.”

Gramps seemed to waiver and retreated one step. “I’m not sure...”

“You have two choices.” Tomar held up two claws. “Either I need you and you are coming with me, de-chipped, or you refuse, then I don’t need you anymore, and I’ll kill you. We have no time for hesitations. Choose, Gramps. Death or freedom.”

“If you put it that way.” Gramps tightened his jaw and unzipped the top of his red overalls then presented the pale skin of his bony back to the shape-shifter.

Tomar enjoyed piercing the soft white skin as he dug into the flesh. He ripped out the small chip with intentional roughness.

Gramps uttered a muffled scream but did not shy away from his claw.

“Done!” Tomar laughed. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Thank you, Fierce Leader.” Gramps zipped up his overalls.

“No time to waste. Let’s go after those guards before they leave this level and slip away. We’ll rally whatever gang we can find as we go and extract their chips.”

The old man rolled his shoulders under the overalls, as if the cut bothered him. “How are we going to find the guards?”

“Leave that to me.” Tomar sniffed the stale stench, turning his head slowly. “This way.” He pointed in the direction where he could discern the distinctive scent of Riggeur and Alendresis. Still, he didn’t like the idea that the two other guards with them had snake blood.

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## Level Nineteen - Crimson Zone

Cole struggled to get one leg in front of the other, grateful for the support of Rhonda and Javel. He couldn’t believe Rhonda had found a way to contact the others and get him away from Tomar and his gang.

Xerna led the way, cool as ice as usual, navigating the corridors without her compad. Nothing seemed to faze that part-Karatzin girl, although Cole felt tension between her and Javel. To think of it, Javel had snake-blood, too, at an even greater degree. Must be handy to sense what's coming through every shift of the air and have quick reflexes and natural defenses.

Smooth rescue. Rhonda had grit. And her medical preparedness had probably saved Cole's life. He turned to her. "What happened to Tomar? I didn't see him during the struggle."

Rhonda readjusted her shoulder under his arm, which brought an onslaught of agony. When Cole grimaced, she smiled in apology, so close to his face. "Tomar won't bother us anymore."

"You killed him?" Each step lanced painful shafts into Cole's upper chest, but he had to chuckle. He started to really like the woman. She wasn't just a beautiful, smart, undisciplined wild thing after all. She had other qualities as well. Dispatching that shape-shifter more than made up for her flaws. Right now, he could kiss her for giving him another chance at life.

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### Level Nineteen - Crimson Zone

When Cole stumbled, Rhonda stiffened to prevent his fall and support the extra weight. Her head pounded and she felt tempted to ask Xerna to support Cole in her place, but she thought better of it. Xerna knew the way and could sense danger ahead.

Rhonda feared the Captain wouldn't last very long at this rate. His eyes didn't focus very well, and he hadn't talked in a while. What had possessed him to play hero? Now he slowed their progress along the corridor. "How far is that mineshaft?"

Xerna forged ahead and didn't look back. "Only a kilometer or so."

Noticing Xerna didn't use her compad, Rhonda asked, "Aren't you concerned about meeting a horde of convicts on the loose?"

"Nah! I can feel them coming. Besides, few would dare attack armed guards."

"Maybe in a normal situation." Rhonda feared the phasers may not suffice to repel an eventual attack. "The withdrawal from the Styx impairs their judgment. They have no fear. Some think they are invincible."

As Rhonda attempted to pull out the compad from her pocket to check for inmates in the vicinity, the Captain faltered and she had to compensate and regain her balance again.



“Inmates coming to the left,” Xerna announced without slowing down.

Rhonda finally pulled out her compad and awkwardly punched the locator mode with her thumb.

“I see them in the next corridor. Intersection ten meters away.”

“They stink.” Xerna didn’t seem to mind. “How many?”

“Ten or so. A close group.”

“No sweat. I got it.” Xerna pulled out her phaser and set it on explode. She ran ahead and stopped just short of the intersection. Kneeling, she looked around the corner, aimed and fired. The conflagration must have collapsed a wall, because it sent a cloud of dust that showered their corridor.

Xerna rose and brushed herself as she motioned Rhonda and Javel forward. “Hurry. They ran away like rabbits.”

Holding her compad in one hand and supporting Cole with the other arm, Rhonda hastened as best she could. “Captain?”

The muffled response at least indicated that he hadn’t lost consciousness. A good sign, considering. But he looked in a lot of pain, and Rhonda could see a dark shiny stain seeping through under his partly open uniform. “The bandage is saturated. He shouldn’t be moving. He’s losing too much blood.”

On the other side of the Captain who dragged his feet, Javel rolled his eyes. “Don’t worry, Riggeur can take it. He wouldn’t want us to slow down on his account.”

Infuriated by Javel’s lack of concern, Rhonda blurted. “I don’t care how tough he is. He could die anytime if we don’t stop, at least for a while. I need to check his bandage.”

“Not now.” Xerna spoke with calm authority. “When we reach a safer place. We’re almost there.”

Despite her reservations, Rhonda did not insist. She understood all their lives were at stake. They reached a closed titanium door. Xerna applied her hand to the screen and it opened with only her DNA. Javel and Rhonda dragged the Captain across the threshold into a small dark area. A flight of stairs went up to what looked like a wide landing.

“Maintenance area,” Xerna explained as she secured the door behind them.

“Up there?” Rhonda asked.

Xerna nodded.

Rhonda and Javel carried the Captain up the steps toward the landing.

When they reached the landing, Xerna seemed to relax. “Now that we are safe, you can take a few minutes to see to the Captain.”

By the dim light, Rhonda saw they'd ventured upon a vast platform. Along the walls, perfectly aligned red robots stood in their cradles. All clean and shiny, they obviously serviced the crimson floor. A number of modular devices, tubular units, and various parts adorned the walls, lined up like in a factory. At the center of the platform, a console emitted electronic sounds. Several screens displayed the progress of the robots at work on the ceiling conduits.

"Some robots are programmed to attempt repairs automatically in case of emergency," Xerna explained. "I guess the tremors gave them plenty to do."

Rhonda noticed a bare patch of wall under an electronic panel and pointed Javel in that direction. "There. Help me lean the Captain against that wall."

Javel gently turned in synch with Rhonda, and they eased the Captain to a sitting position, with the wall supporting his back. Riggeur groaned as they let go of him. Not a good sign.

"Thanks, Javel. Give me some room."

Javel stepped back.

Opening the top part of Cole's uniform, Rhonda realized the flow of blood had soaked and loosened the pad. "I don't like the looks of this. I wonder how much blood he's lost already." She changed the dressing in silence.

When Rhonda glanced back, she saw Javel trying to grab Xerna by the neck. When Xerna twisted out of his grasp, Javel looked peeved.

Rhonda pretended not to notice. "I don't know if he can make it all the way to the Garrison in his condition. He's unresponsive again."

Javel squinted at the Captain. "If he can't travel, I'm afraid we'll have to leave him behind."

"No." Xerna said with unexpected force. "He is our Captain. We have to take him with us. What do you think, Rhonda?"

Rhonda hesitated, pondering what would be best for her charge. It seemed that the Captain didn't stand a better chance, whether they left him behind or carried him with them. "He can't go on much longer. The only thing that could save him at this point would be a blood transfusion and microsurgery to close the blood vessels. I'd need a fully stocked infirmary for that."

"That's right, you're a doc." Xerna looked stern. "Well, there is an infirmary on each level."

"But I need one with complete surgical equipment." Rhonda punched her compad. "The closest surgical facility is on Level Sixteen, the Yellow Zone, all the way on the east side of the complex."

The frown on Xerna's face faded and her expression brightened. "If we take the mineshaft, there is a connecting tunnel to the maintenance platform of Level Sixteen." She bit her lips in concentration.

“But I haven’t seen it lately. It could be blocked, or damaged. It could become a death trap. I wouldn’t recommend it.”

Javel eyed the ceiling like a bored teenager. “Okay. We take him along. Let’s take the mineshaft. We’ll see how things look when we reach that tunnel to Level Sixteen.” He crouched to pick up the Captain and motioned to Rhonda. “Ready?” He winked. “It will be fine.”

Javel’s irresponsible confidence irritated Rhonda further. She feared Captain Riggeur wouldn’t last long enough to reach that tunnel, much less cross Level Sixteen and make it to the surgical ward. The thought made her wail inside. She had to save him. She couldn’t let him die, no matter the cost.

Rhonda wedged her shoulder under the Captain’s arm and lifted. He seemed heavier than before, like dead weight.

“This way.” Xerna led them to a red cylindrical hole in the wall, about three meters in diameter. “That’s a tunnel for the maintenance robots to get to the ceiling pipes for repairs. The shafts and the tunnels are totally dark since the robots don’t need to see. We’ll need our floodlights.”

Darn. Rhonda hated dark confined spaces. And here she was, almost two hundred meters below the surface, ready to enter a dark tunnel. As she fumbled to turn on the floodlight at her belt, Rhonda heard a mechanical noise coming from the gaping black hole. “What’s that?”

As if he’d sensed danger ahead, Javel already pulled away to the side. “Robots!”

Rhonda matched his move to carry the Captain out of the way.

“Oops! Forgot to tell you.” Xerna chuckled. Did she really find that funny? Was she testing Javel? Getting back at him? “Got to watch for the little guys.”

Javel didn’t seem to like the joke at all and Rhonda didn’t get it.

Xerna’s mirth subsided. “They’ll trample whatever stands in their way. No one is supposed to be here and they are not programmed to avoid people. They go straight through, no matter what.”

The meter-tall robot exited the tunnel on his rubber caterpillar treads, carrying a broken tubular elbow. The machine turned, and as it approached a large bin the lid opened. The robot dropped the broken module into it then parked itself in a cradle on the wall.

Rhonda stared at it. “Can’t we use one of those things to carry the Captain?”

Javel shook his head. “Not where we’re going. The mineshaft is too rough. They only stick to smooth surfaces. Besides, it would take too much time to dismantle and rig up one of those things.”

Rhonda wondered how he knew so much about the robots and the mineshaft but didn’t ask. Out of patience, she turned to Xerna. “Anything else you forgot to tell us about the dangers of the tunnels?” Rhonda immediately regretted the edge in her voice.

But Xerna didn't seem to take offense. "I'll let you know if I think of anything. Let's go."

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### Level Nineteen - Crimson Zone

Tomar sniffed the air and stopped in front of the titanium door. "They've gone through here not long ago." He turned to Gramps. "Can you open that door?"

Gramps walked up to the door and scrutinized the wall around the digital scanner. Behind Tomar, three members of his original team, a young Juzzaar with dark glasses, a bald and burly human, and a hairy madman who had rejoined their leader, watched intensely. All of them bled through the rough fabric of the red overalls from small wounds on the back of the left shoulder.

Gramps scratched his receding forehead. "You have anymore of Riggeur's DNA?"

"No, it's all dried up."

"Try it anyway."

Tomar applied his hand to the scanner. The device beeped and flashed a red refusal. Enraged, Tomar punched the scanner with its fist. The glass shattered, uncovering a network of printed circuits and wires.

Gramps gave him a broad smile. "Good work, Fierce Leader! You just simplified my job."

"Then hurry up." Tomar wouldn't let his prey escape. He could smell Riggeur's blood and Alendresis' sweat. He could feel them very close, and that proximity gave him pleasure. He wanted to follow them close.

## Chapter Seven

Maintenance conduit - Level Nineteen - Crimson Zone.

Sweat dripped down Rhonda's forehead, and she wiped it off with her sleeve. The temperature had risen gradually, as if the breath of some hellish dragon heated the large duct from the outside.

Despite Javel's help, the weight of the Captain, who wandered in and out of consciousness, took its toll on Rhonda's endurance. Her calves felt like wood, her back ached, and her arm and shoulder supporting the Captain shot pain through her at every step. But she suffered in silence and forced herself to go on.

Slowly, by the illumination of the floodlights clipped to their belts, the four guards progressed along the red maintenance tunnels that circled the facility for kilometers. Xerna led them through innumerable turns and connecting passages. Rhonda felt disoriented but grateful for the woman's knowledge of this maintenance network.

As Rhonda checked her compad to make sure no one followed, another tremor shook the tubular structure which rattled and moaned, a distressing sound. Rhonda almost lost her balance and tightened her grip on the Captain's waist and arm to keep him upright.

When the aftershock unbalanced them again, Rhonda reached out to the wall to regain her equilibrium. The burning sensation made her pull back her hand. "Are we inside the facility or outside the walls?" She wondered with increasing dread what overheated the conduit.

Xerna, in front of them, glanced over her shoulder. "This duct runs outside the duracrete walls. How did you guess?"

"You could cook on that surface." Should Rhonda tell them what she feared? Yes, these brave guards had risked their lives to save the Captain and they deserved the truth. "Normally these conduits are surrounded by ice. It should be freezing in here."

"I'll take the heat over the cold anytime." Javel laughed. "Sorry. It's the Karatzin in me. We rock-huggers enjoy warm surfaces." He motioned toward Xerna. "She likes the heat, too, but she won't admit it. She doesn't like to acknowledge her snake-blood."

Xerna shot him a fierce glance. “Unlike you, I do embrace my human heritage. I don’t understand why you insist on worshipping your reptilian ancestry. I suspect you would sooner have scales than skin.”

They both seemed completely human to Rhonda, but as a medic she knew their physiology presented subtle differences. For one thing, neither Xerna nor Javel sweated at all while she was drenched from the heat. The Captain looked pale with an unhealthy sheen to his face. He shivered, probably from loss of blood.

Rhonda wished she still had her scarf to make a bandana. “It feels like there might be a lava flow running close to our tunnel. I know the wall material is tough, but I’m not sure how long it’ll last without melting. Magma melts even stone.” There, she’d said it.

Xerna glanced back but didn’t slow down. “We have to hurry, then. We are not too far from the mineshaft. We’ll be safer there.”

When the Captain moaned, Rhonda looked up at his face. His feverish eyes opened and he gave her a strained smile. The fact that he was still conscious eased her mind a little.

As Rhonda walked faster, trying not to jolt the Captain, she wondered at the safety of the mineshaft. It sounded to her like an ideal pipeline for a river of hot magma forcing its way to the surface. Should she share her dread with the others?

What would he do in her place? Rhonda remembered one of his speeches about positive attitude and keeping hope and morale high. All right. They would find out soon enough, and Rhonda desperately hoped the facts would prove her wrong.

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## Level Nineteen - Crimson Zone

While Gramps fiddled with the wiring of the door panel, Tomar paced impatiently. “How much longer?”

“Soon, Fierce Leader. Damn!” Gramps’ suddenly pulled back his bony fingers from inside the panel and shook his hand. “I hate electric jolts. Without the proper DNA it takes time. I have to bypass the sensors without triggering a security lockdown. It’s tricky.”

Tomar feared the scent of the four guards would soon dissipate. Already, other overpowering smells rose from the many convicts and wafted down from the damaged ceiling pipes that seeped food

and refuse. Cole Riggeur and his bitch had passed through that door less than an hour ago and Tomar wondered what lay beyond. It wasn't a stair door, so what was it?

When the door finally slid open, Tomar rejoiced. Beyond the door, the scent of the four guards still hung strong. Tomar slapped the grizzled engineer on the back. "Good job, Gramps."

Gramps recoiled from the slap and massaged his bony shoulder, still bleeding from the locator chip extraction. "Should I close the door now?"

"No. Leave it open. It will invite more of our comrades to join our little expedition." Any kind of chaos Tomar could manage to create, the more opportunities for him and his friends to escape.

Gramps winked. "As you wish, Fierce Leader."

Climbing a set of metallic stairs leading to a large landing, Tomar realized he'd walked onto a utility platform, a robotic maintenance area. He couldn't help but grin. "The Gods of the Old Ways are with us!"

"The Gods be blessed indeed!" Gramps' beady eyes opened wide with glee.

"Tools! Lots of tools!" Tomar laughed and addressed the three other recruits. "Tools make the best weapons." Tomar inspected the arm of a robot sitting in its cradle in perfect alignment with many others. The titanium fingers, equipped with soldering torches, circular saws, and a number of power tools, would boost his men's confidence and give them an edge against the guards in close quarters.

The other convicts now seemed to understand his excitement and foraged for weapons of choice among the titanium devices attached to the robotic arms. They started dismantling a few robots in a salvaging rampage, strapping power packs to their backs and plugging and testing various blades and torches, like children discovering new toys.

Sniffing the air, an affectation since olfactory cells covered his whole body, Tomar followed the scent of his prey through the maintenance area, all the way to the entrance of a dark tunnel. He squinted to peer in the dark. "We'll need some light to get in there. Find us flood lights, flash lights, any kind of light with a battery pack."

The Juzzaar, slightly smaller than the one killed by Riggeur's friends, looked up from the robot he had bashed against the wall to dismantle. He held a mean-looking chainsaw and smiled crookedly below dark glasses. "I don't need light. I can guide you through."

Tomar couldn't stand the idea of letting someone else steer his gang or have the advantage of sight over him. As the leader, Tomar couldn't make himself vulnerable. "I can smell them. You can't. I must show the way." He turned to the others. "Keep looking for light and weapons." Tomar wished he had more men. "Gramps!"

“Yes, Fierce Leader.”

“Get back to the main floor, find more of our friends, and bring them here. The guards have phasers. We need more numbers in our ranks.”

Gramps bowed slightly then cleared his throat. “But aren’t we wasting precious time?”

“Then you’ll have to hurry.” Tomar shot him a ferocious glare and enjoyed seeing Gramps cringe. “And don’t scare them by telling them about how I’ll remove their locator chips.”

“As you wish, Fierce Leader.” Gramps still looked concerned. “You won’t leave without me?”

Tomar laughed. “Don’t worry, we have time on our side. Now we now where the guards have gone, and they are not far at all. Besides, Riggeur is bound to slow them down.” Tomar could almost taste his revenge. “We want them to show us the way out before we kill them.” Revenge would feel sweeter for the wait.

The Juzzaar stepped confidently into the black tunnel, alone and removed his dark glasses to look ahead. His pale gold skin almost glowed in the dark. “I wonder where this goes.”

Tomar accepted a light from one of his men, hung it on his chest from a chain around his neck and tested the battery. “I’ll bet they’re going back to their cozy little Garrison.” He envisioned a comfortable, luxurious place with all the amenities he’d lacked during his internment. “We’ll follow the grays straight to freedom.”

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#### Maintenance tunnel - Crimson Zone

Cole must have lost consciousness for a while. As he came to, he cursed the jarring of Rhonda and Javel’s quick steps. Cold sweat made him shiver, and he felt weak. If only the pain in his chest could stop for a few seconds.

Struggling to remain conscious, he tried to focus on Rhonda. Grateful for her resourcefulness, he marveled at her unsuspected strength. What a wonderful woman. Something about that didn’t sound right. Was he delirious? He tried to remember why he used to dislike her, but the process made his head hurt, and the thought eluded him.

The tunnel seemed to waver under his unsteady feet, but as he faltered strong arms caught him around the waist. The blur running in front of him must be Xerna. The surrounding walls seemed to soften and melt. Sinister wheezing sounds and soft moans surrounded him. Then he realized the noise



came from his own breath and groans. How he despised being weak, unable to control even the sounds he made.

In a moment of clarity, he saw the walls shrink then expand, as if they were made of soft dough. Probably a hallucination. After a few painful steps down an incline, the jarring suddenly ceased as the four guards paused.

Like in a dream, Cole stood at the threshold of a vast cavern with stalactites and stalagmites, like stone pillars of irregular shapes. As the moving floodlights cast shadows on the high vaulted ceiling, the place reminded Cole of a ruined cathedral.

The sounds of the guards' conversation echoed and bounced against the bare stone, but the meaning of the words escaped Cole.

Feeling strangely remote from the rest of his companions, he admired the natural wonder. He heard water drip from the cavern vaults, but he must be hallucinating. A frozen planet had no dripping water.

Cole's back slid against the rough stone as Rhonda and Javel eased him down to a sitting position. When Rhonda's deft fingers opened his uniform, Cole shuddered at the contact of her warm hand on his skin. He wanted to thank her but the words wouldn't form on his tongue and he moaned instead.

Rhonda spoke to him but he couldn't make out her words. When she brought a canteen to his lips, Cole realized how thirsty he felt and drank thankfully. Rhonda seemed upset as she changed the dressing on his wound.

Why had she insisted in taking him along? The three guards would stand a better chance without him. He never realized Rhonda cared about him that much. Was it pity or compassion in her soft brown eyes? Or could it be something more?

Somehow Cole hoped Rhonda felt more than dutiful loyalty toward him. He liked the determination in the set of her jaw. The stubbornness he'd once resented had become somewhat endearing to him. How brave she looked, how strong.

The respite didn't last and soon the painful trek behind Xerna resumed, jarring Cole almost beyond human endurance. But he set his legs in motion and walked like an automaton. Soon, he felt himself drift into a blissful state of semi-consciousness where he couldn't feel the pain anymore.

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## Maintenance Tunnels, Level Nineteen - Crimson Zone

Did the tunnel start to melt, or did Tomar have nightmarish visions from Styx withdrawal? In the unstable torchlight that swayed with each of his hurried steps, it seemed that the walls would soon close upon him. His lumbering companions didn't seem to mind the melting floor and walls, but they also foamed at the mouth and rolled their eyes at the slightest excitement. The scorching breath in the tunnel and the insidious smell of hot rubber from his soft shoes told Tomar the unusually violent quakes may have triggered some natural disaster more dangerous than he previously thought.

What had started as a perfect opportunity to create havoc and escape suddenly escalated into a potentially dangerous situation. What was happening to Zurin Five? Tomar took comfort in the fact that the galactic prison was indestructible. But with the increasing rate of earthquakes, could it be that the inhospitable planet had grown stronger than the duracrete walls? If that were the case, the underground facility could become a death trap for thousands of prisoners, and Tomar didn't intend to figure among the casualties.

As he stopped at a main junction to search the warm air for the scent of his prey, Tomar heard sharp clicking sounds advancing on his group from several connecting ducts. Something else inhabited the tunnels, something mechanical with no biological scent. "Robots!" he yelled and leapt to the ceiling, forming suction cups on his hands and knees to avoid getting trampled by several caterpillar-powered machines rushing full speed toward them.

Gramps, who followed close, threw himself against the wall and screamed at the contact of the hot surface. Tomar had to keep shifting shape to avoid exposing the same part of his skin more than a second at a time to the burning ceiling. The smell of seared flesh filled the tunnel.

The big Juzzaar yelled and charged the first robot in a brutal confrontation, chainsaw hulk against machine. He grappled with the short automaton, sawed off one of its arms, lifted the robot and threw it with such force that it shattered in several pieces. Parts flew, and the caterpillar treads, couched on the side, kept turning with an awful squeaking sound, trying to regain traction on the smooth surface.

When the other robots reached the scene, they stopped to clean up the mess. Ignoring the escaped convicts, the automatons set out to pick up all the broken pieces and carry them away.

The rest of Tomar's gang, a Karatzin and four humans, laughed and clapped at the Juzzaar's victory, some patting him on the back, others jumping for joy, dancing and hooting in homage, as they maneuvered clumsily around the working robots.

Tomar dropped down from the ceiling and watched the robots leave toward the maintenance

platform. He didn't like the idea of the little monsters charging from behind later on, but he must take chances. Good thing his keen sense of hearing had given him enough warning.

Around him his men's victory glee degenerated into a mad frenzy as they activated the power weapons in mock challenge.

"What's so funny?" Tomar yelled to end the craziness spreading among his gang.

His companions immediately stopped laughing and turned off the power tools.

"Bunch of idiots," he mumbled then, following the scent, he turned into an adjacent tunnel to resume his hunt for the guards. With such a fresh scent, they couldn't be too far ahead.

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Mineshaft above the natural cave, leading to Level Sixteen

Rhonda felt past any caring about the overload inflicted on her body. She pretended to be one of the maintenance robots and kept going up the steep incline, no matter what her body tried to tell her. She felt so tired, each step up the slope seemed like the very last she could possibly take. But her survival and that of the Captain depended on her ability to keep up with the fast pace set by Xerna and Javel.

To get her mind off the muscle pain, she focused on the gritty surface of the wide stone shaft they traveled. Fifty years ago, massive boring bits had stripped rock and rubble to dig their way to the deep veins of Styx crystal. Remnants of railway tracks and old conveyor belts attested to the mining methods, when robotic carts took away the newly mined material to be separated then refined. The automated mines had required little supervision. How Rhonda wished she had one of those carts right now to carry the Captain.

It felt as if they'd been walking uphill for over an hour, but Rhonda knew otherwise. "How far until we reach the passage to Level Sixteen?"

"Almost there." Xerna showed no sign of weakening, and Rhonda wondered how she could remain so calm in the midst of such turmoil.

As for Javel, his carefree attitude remained an enigma. Rhonda didn't get these people at all and concluded that mixed Karatzin DNA offered more differences between the races than she previously assumed. All she needed to know was that Xerna and Javel had come to rescue the Captain, and for that, she felt grateful. Rhonda performed another check on her compad. "At least, no one is following

us.” The realization gave her comfort and hope.

Finally, Xerna stopped on a flat landing indicating the branching of an adjacent tunnel. Rhonda and Javel lowered the Captain gently against the stone wall of the intersecting horizontal shaft.

Xerna went to assess the connecting tunnel and returned immediately. “It looks clear as far as I can see, but it could be collapsed further on. I still don’t think it’s a good idea to take the Captain back into that mad house.”

Rhonda sighed. “Surgery and blood transfusion are his only chances of survival. He’ll never make it to the Garrison otherwise.”

As Rhonda saw Xerna and Javel exchange a mysterious glance, she wondered what passed between them. They stared at the Captain and so did Rhonda. He seemed focused as he stared back at them, but she couldn’t tell whether he could see them or not.

Javel cleared his throat. “If the Captain is this far gone, I think we should just leave him here and you should come with us and save yourself.”

“Leave the Captain? Are you crazy?” Rhonda couldn’t bear the thought.

“If, as you implied earlier, the lava flows are this close to the surface, this shaft could become a lava pipeline. We can’t outrun a lava flow if the Captain is slowing us down. And if the planet is going to blow sooner than we expected, we better get back up and find a way off this rock as quickly as possible.”

Their argument made sense. But Rhonda just couldn’t abandon the Captain, especially after all he had done for her. If she left him here, he would die, and she couldn’t bear the thought, even less the responsibility of his death. She had the ability to save him, so she must at least try. “I will not leave him here!” Her loud voice echoed in the cavernous shaft.

The Captain moaned and she knelt next to him, holding his hand. He seemed conscious and tried to speak. She moved closer to hear what he wanted to say.

“Save yourself,” he whispered. “All of you... Too late for me.”

Xerna and Javel had come near and caught his words.

Rhonda balked at the thought. “I can’t just leave you here. I’m a medic. I must do whatever I can to save you.”

“Get out of here,” the Captain said with unexpected strength. “It’s an order.”

Although visibly upset, Xerna nodded. “Come, Rhonda. We must go.”

Javel encircled Xerna’s shoulder. “Quickly. There is little time.”

A hot breath from below told them the magma was getting closer as it worked its way up the

mineshaft, but Rhonda didn't budge. "I'm staying with him. I don't always follow orders, and this is one of these times. You should go. I'll meet you later, hopefully with the Captain."

"Wait!" Xerna freed herself from Javel's grip and came to Rhonda. "You have to take the first tunnel on the right, then the second branching on the left, then you'll emerge on the maintenance platform of Level Sixteen."

"Thanks. Both of you, for all you did for us." Rhonda smiled but couldn't help the tears in her eyes. "Because of you we are alive and I hope we all stay that way. I wish you luck."

"So do we." Xerna stepped back reluctantly then turned and walked away, slowly at first.

Then Javel guided Xerna ahead of him, one hand on the small of her back. Rhonda saw them hurry up the slanted mineshaft to the bounce of their floodlights. Definitely a strange breed those mixed Karatzin.

After they disappeared around a bend of the shaft, only darkness reigned beyond the small sphere of Rhonda's single floodlight. She shivered. God she hated dark spaces.

Now alone with the Captain, Rhonda wondered why she jeopardized her life for his, but one look at him confirmed that she had made the right decision. If he didn't survive, she wasn't sure she wanted to live.

Looking back at her life, Rhonda had already lost her sister. Although she loved her very much, she was powerless to save her. Now Rhonda refused to lose another person she cared about. Not if she could help it. She swore she would save Cole, or she would die trying.

But how would she carry the Captain by herself? Cole Riggeur seemed to understand her dilemma. He smiled feebly and attempted to stand up. Rhonda offered her shoulder for support and helped him up. As he leaned heavily upon her, she heard him whisper, "Stubborn."

She would have smiled, had she not been so worried.

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#### Maintenance shaft - Level Sixteen - Yellow Zone

Each awkward step inside the yellow tunnel seemed to take all Rhonda's strength. She suspected the Captain made a costly effort just to remain standing. He was losing so much blood, he would soon faint from lack of it. And if he did, Rhonda couldn't possibly carry him all the way to the infirmary along kilometers of labyrinths, across a rioting floor. The seed of an idea started to take shape in

Rhonda's mind.

Cole's grip on her shoulder held urgency, as if he knew they only had each other and a very slim chance of survival once they re-entered the prison complex.

"Lots of convicts," he managed to say.

Rhonda knew the main floor of Level Sixteen would be buzzing with loose inmates. Although they weren't quite as violent as those on Level Nineteen, they still presented a serious threat, mainly with Styx withdrawal. Rhonda shuddered at the memory of their encounter with the raping gang. Were they still at it?

But Rhonda figured the inmates must realize by now that the quakes only worsened with time. It wouldn't take long before they understood their predicament and feared for their lives. Then they would become insanely violent. Desperate people did desperate things, she'd heard the Captain say many times.

Rhonda noticed that the yellow tunnel leading to Level Sixteen didn't seem as hot as the deeper ones. She took it as a good sign. Following Xerna's directions, Rhonda progressed slowly. A sudden clicking sound behind her reminded her of the robots going about their automated tasks.

Insidious panic threatened to seized Rhonda. She had to get Cole out of the way. He couldn't afford to sustain further injury. As she looked back, she saw the speeding caterpillar rushing toward them through the center of the tunnel. In desperation, Rhonda shoved the Captain to the side.

As the automaton whisked by, its arm hooked onto the floodlight clipped to Rhonda's belt. She tried to hold on to it as she ran alongside the robot, but the light slipped through her sweaty hands. She went on running after the speeding automaton that carried the light along the tunnel, but she couldn't catch up with it. When she stopped, out of breath, Rhonda saw the robot turn into a connecting passage, the one she was supposed to take, the one leading to the maintenance platform. Then the light disappeared, and she stood in complete darkness.

A dreadful shiver raised the hair on Rhonda's spine. "Captain?"

She heard a faint moan in response and directed her hesitant steps in that general direction. Now she understood what the blind must have gone through in the older days, before science could restore eyesight.

"Captain?" Her extended hands found the wall and she followed it back. Why in heaven did it have to be so black? Heart pounding, legs shaking, all senses in alert, she whispered, "Cole? Where are you?"

## Chapter Eight

### Mining Shaft, between Levels Nineteen and Sixteen

Following the guards' scent, Tomar crossed the cathedral cave and found the ascending mining shaft. He smelled the strong emanations from the two Karatzin guards along with those of Riggeur and Alendresis, but when Tomar and his gang reached the level of a smaller passage branching out, the scents diverged.

"The Karatzin guards went that way." Tomar indicated the top of the main slanted shaft. "But our two fugitives went inside this tunnel." He secretly felt relieved at the thought that he wouldn't have to deal with the Karatzin. Their poison could be fatal to Monacks as it neutralized all the cells of their body at the same time.

Gramps raised bushy eyebrows. "Which is the best way out?"

"Never mind that." Tomar snapped, angry at being questioned. "We are following Riggeur and his bitch into the smaller passage. Besides, I smell fire down below, and I don't want to end up incinerated in this shaft." He didn't mention his susceptibility to Karatzin poison, or his personal vendetta with Riggeur and the human female.

The members of his motley gang grumbled but none dared challenge him. The fact that fear motivated them didn't bother Tomar a bit. He set out after the two guards. Their clean scent had changed since he'd met them. Now Riggeur smelled of blood and Alendresis of sweat.

Tomar wondered how far ahead they'd traveled, but he didn't want to catch up with them too early. He wanted to enjoy an old-fashioned hunt, give them the illusion that they were safe, then when they least expected it, he would strike. And this time, they would talk and give him the codes, and their DNA would lead him all the way to the surface and off the prison planet of Zurin Five.

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Inside a maintenance conduit - Level Sixteen - Yellow Zone

The darkness around Rhonda choked her, as if someone had dropped a black lid upon her. She felt trapped. Her breathing, brought short by fear more than exertion, echoed in the tunnel. Would she ever see the light again? How stupid of her to let that robot take her light. Her race after the automaton had separated her from Cole, and now she had to go back and find him.

Although she opened her eyes wide, she saw only darkness as she clung to one wall of the tunnel, afraid that if she let go of it, she would be lost forever. Too bad it was too wide to touch both walls at once. How she hated dark spaces.

A faint rustle ahead made her shiver. Could there be lurking rodents? Or big Juzzaar who could see even in the darkest pit? “Cole?”

Despite the fact that she knew no obstacles lay in her path, she progressed slowly along the wall. Each feeling step cost her a dose of precious courage. How long would she last without panicking? Making her way back to the Captain seemed like a long painful trek. *Breathe!* She had to remind herself, and she made an effort to take slow deep breaths.

That rustle, again, then a moan. She felt somewhat relieved when she realized that the rustle came from Cole’s labored wheezing. She had to get him out of here, and fast. When she neared the sound, she poked the blackness with her foot and connected with Cole’s body. Stooping, she touched him carefully to determine his position, then she braced herself to help him up.

“Can you hear me?”

Cole groaned in response.

“We have to move. Don’t worry, you are not blind. It’s just that we have no light.” She wished her reassuring words could ease her own foreboding.

But Rhonda took heart in the fact that she was no longer alone. She’d found Cole, and although she knew he could not help in case of attack, she found comfort in his presence. Guiding herself by following the conduit wall, she started in the direction of the maintenance platform. Cole still moved his feet, as if determined to follow her as best he could. She felt grateful for his will to survive. He hadn’t given up and sustained his effort despite the pain he must feel.

How would Rhonda find the branching conduit in the dark? She should navigate by touch but couldn’t do that while supporting Cole. When had she started to call him Cole? She wondered when he had become so familiar that she would use his first name. She liked it and decided to call him Cole from now on, at least in her mind.

Rhonda heard the rumble grow from a quiet purr to a low thundering roar that shook the tunnel. Her best effort to keep her balance failed, and she stumbled, falling with Cole to the passage floor.



“Are you okay?” What a stupid question.

Cole grunted. A good sign.

Not daring to move, Rhonda remained sitting until the tremor ceased. Had she turned around in the fall? Unlike the previous mineshaft, the maintenance tunnels lay perfectly level, so she had no reference as to which way to go. If she set out in the wrong direction, she would never see the light again, and she would die with Cole in the dark.

If only she had the tiniest shred of light. Remembering the compad clipped at her belt, she turned it on. At least, she could tell from it whether or not she was followed. No red dots showed around the two blue dots representing Cole and herself, just outside the north wall of the complex. Not designed for human circulation, the maintenance conduits did not register on the floor plan. But she could see where the maintenance platform lay, and she would direct her steps towards it.

The illumination from the compad screen showed her a short segment of the tunnel. Light! Faint, but with eyes now accustomed to the darkness, she could see both walls of the yellow cylindrical passage. At least, she would recognize the next branching when she came upon it.

A glimmer of hope gave her new energy to pick up Cole and hurry her pace in what she knew to be the right direction. When they reached the intersection with the tunnel leading to the maintenance platform, Rhonda found new confidence. Soon, she saw a faint glow ahead and rejoiced at the prospect of light, no matter how dim.

The glow, at first diffuse, soon filled the tunnel, then Rhonda and her charge emerged onto a maintenance platform, very similar to the one on Level Nineteen, with all the robots, modules, and spare parts painted a bright yellow. When Rhonda eased Cole against the wall, she noticed his bandage soaked with blood and wished she could change it, but she had none left.

Time to implement the idea that had brushed her mind in the mining shaft. If she couldn't find a wagon to carry Cole, she'd have to make one. So she focused on the robots aligned on the wall. Although electronics wasn't her specialty, she could probably rewire one to use as a carrier.

To combat fatigue, Rhonda forced down an energy bar as she set about dismantling one of the speedy robots. In her hurry, she shocked herself and jumped at the strong electric discharge. Sparks buzzed and a burnt smell told her she'd fried the little monster. She'd gone about it the wrong way.

Selecting a new robot, she started again, but this time she switched it off before removing its parts, and things went smoothly. Devoid of arms and sensor head, the vehicle looked like a simple caterpillar engine. Perfect. Now, she needed a cradle large enough to carry Cole, and something to steer and control the powerful electric engine.

A half cylinder section about two meters long would provide a bed for Cole. She clamped it on top of the caterpillar mechanism, glad for the simple modular parts that allowed many kinds of combinations. But she also needed a step to stand or kneel on the machine herself. Rhonda had found out when she lost her light that she couldn't run at the robot's speed. Besides, she intended to operate on Cole as soon as they reached the surgery ward, and she would need all her strength then.

As she foraged on the maintenance platform, Rhonda thought she heard sounds coming from the tunnel. She checked her compad but did not detect any guards or inmates coming toward her. She approached the dark entrance and listened intently but heard nothing more. Probably some robots, but she'd swear she heard faint echoes, like faraway voices.

When she found a flat metal bar, she clamped it as best she could to the robot's frame on the back of the caterpillar. Unfortunately, as soon as she stepped upon it, it fell off. She threw it down in frustration and went searching into the large yellow bin full of broken parts.

Finally, she came upon a short metal plate. Its shape looked like it would accept the modular clamps and it did. When she tested its strength it remained secure. That would do, but at such speed, she needed to hang onto something for balance.

When she checked on Cole, he looked deathly pale.

He acknowledged her with a strained smile. "I'm still alive," he wheezed between uneven breaths.

Rhonda must hurry.

With a robotic arm as a steering column and an on-off button, the contraption would serve its purpose. One problem remained, Rhonda would have no control over the speed, and these automatons ran fast.

When she turned on the engine, Rhonda realized the robot emitted loud clicking noises that would alert the inmates loose in the wards. If they spotted her, or if she got stuck or broke down on the way to the infirmary, she would become a choice target. Nothing she could do about that. A calculated risk.

Was it faint whispers she heard again, or did her mind play tricks on her? Robots did not speak, but voices could carry far into the tunnels. Maybe inmates' voices filtered through the broken ductwork on the ceiling and echoed inside the maintenance tunnels.

She had to leave now.

It wouldn't do to spill Cole overboard going down the clumsy stairs leading to the main level. She led the contraption down the metallic stairs empty. Because of the unwieldy length of the cradle,

the robot did not maneuver very well. After getting stuck twice, requiring shoving and pushing on Rhonda's part, the automaton reached the bottom of the stairs without breaking up. A small victory.

Rhonda then helped Cole down the steps and laid him inside the half pipe cradle. She feared he'd lost too much blood and may not last long enough to reach the surgery ward in time. The thought prompted her to unlock the yellow maintenance door, but she stopped her hand short of the screening pad.

She consulted her compad. Certain that no one stood on the other side of the door, she studied the floor plan and laid her course through the least populated areas on Level Sixteen, the Yellow Zone. According to the layout, she had to travel four kilometers of corridors, and despite the advantage of speed, she shivered at the thought of encountering gangs of psychotic convicts.

The route she chose would cross a few lightly populated blocks, but she couldn't delay Cole anymore and had to take chances. Another calculated risk, as Cole would say. From the increasing paleness of his skin and his feverish look, he had to be in surgery within the next hour, or he would certainly die. Rhonda couldn't afford to take any detour.

She checked that both Cole's phaser and hers adorned her belt, along with his curved blade then she checked the daggers in her boots. Gathering her confidence, she applied her hand to the scanner. When the door opened, she stepped onto the small platform at the back of the caterpillar.

"Hang on, Captain." She saw his hands gripping the sides of the cradle and she flipped the switch. The modified robot took off in a clicking fury and Rhonda clenched the steering arm with sweaty palms. Behind her the door closed automatically.

Rhonda had to call upon all her balance skills to remain on the speeding machine. The robot could recognize and avoid solid objects, like walls and fences, but Rhonda had reservations about its ability to take sharp turns at such speed. No matter, she had to try. The first turn threatened to dump Cole over the side of his cradle as the automaton nearly lost its traction on the floor.

The cells on each side of the corridor zipped by, and Rhonda could hardly follow the two speeding blue dots on her com pad, even less keep track of the many turns she must take. Suddenly, she realized she had missed a turn. She was heading straight for a swarm of convicts. She didn't have time to think and instinctively took the first turn to avoid them, but the automaton stopped of its own accord in front of a dead end wall.

"Good Heavens!" She doubled back, hoping to find her initial route, but the compad now showed that path infested with convicts. They converged toward her from several directions. They'd probably heard the noisy vehicle and hoped for some ungodly distraction, or to seize a device that could

help them escape. What now?

Choosing the least crowded path, Rhonda set a collision course through the smallest gang she could see on her compad. Would they have the good sense to get out of the way of the speeding robot? She couldn't trust these derelicts to think sanely. As she turned the corner, she saw them, fifty meters ahead.

Her blood felt cold as it rushed through her veins. These convicts wore red overalls. They came from Level Nineteen. Level Nineteen? She shuddered at the implications. The lockdown had been compromised and the inmates now mixed at several levels. These dangerous criminals didn't seem intimidated by the speeding machine. At least, they all looked human. Rhonda could fight humans.

Pulling out both phasers, she shot several rounds as she sped toward them. Two men fell under her phase beams. She wedged her feet against the sides of her step for balance and kept shooting. Three more convicts fell, but still four waited for her, determination on their faces.

As she came upon them, Rhonda crouched on her step platform and braced herself for impact, holding onto the cradle. She mumbled a prayer. "St. Michael, patron saint of prison guards, give me the strength."

Upon impact, one man flew off the front of the speeding vehicle. Fortunately, the automaton kept going. But two inmates now clung to the sides of the cradle and rode with it. One of them tried to climb into it. Rhonda couldn't shoot for fear of killing Cole.

Holding on to the steering column as an anchor, she kicked the man who now stood up on the cradle. Rhonda saw the Captain's foot go up and kick the man between the legs. The convict screamed, teetered, then went tumbling overboard and fell to the side. His head smashed against one of the square pillars with a hollow smack.

The last convict dragging to the side of the vehicle slid towards the back and grabbed Rhonda's ankle. His face frozen in a demented grimace, he drooled on his red overalls. Rhonda felt the strong grip bruising her ankle as if she had stepped into a bear trap. She struggled to free herself but failed. She couldn't shoot the man while he held her.

In desperation, Rhonda buttressed herself against the steering column and kicked his arm with her free foot as hard and as fast as she could. The man still held on, even as his body dragged behind the machine on the smooth yellow floor.

Crouching, Rhonda pulled out one of the daggers hidden in her boots and stabbed the man's wrist, aiming to slice the tendons that controlled his fingers. The convict yelled and finally let go of her ankle, slid to the yellow floor and receded quickly. But the blade remained stuck in his hand. Rhonda

loathed letting the weapon go, but it had saved her life. Rising, she checked on Cole, who offered a strained smile. He still held on to the sides of the cradle, his eyes following her movements. “Glad you can see, Captain. It’s a good sign.”

When she consulted her compad, Rhonda realized that the robot had wandered off course through the corridors, sensing the walls and going around them. She corrected her course toward the surgical ward. But as she moved closer, she could see the red dots of several inmates loitering in front of the infirmary door. They didn’t seem in any hurry to leave. Rhonda needed a distraction.

Setting one phaser on explode, she sent a blast to one end of the corridor where the inmates could see and hear it. Immediately, the red dots representing the inmates started moving in that direction. Now Rhonda sped in the opposite direction along a parallel corridor, toward the infirmary, hoping she would have time to get inside before the convicts returned.

When she reached the door, she came to an abrupt stop that almost sent Cole over the side of the cradle, but he still held on. Feverishly, Rhonda applied her palm to the scanner. The infirmary door opened. She drove the robot inside then stopped. The door closed just as the convicts, probably alerted by the noise of the robot, rushed back toward the infirmary.

But Rhonda was safe at last. To make absolutely sure she wouldn’t be interrupted, she disabled the door from the inside by applying Cole’s hand on one scanner while she stretched to touch the other side of the frame with her fingers. Then she entered her secret code. That door wouldn’t open until two guards with her personal code reactivated it.

The thought that Cole might not survive the surgery crossed her mind and Rhonda shuddered. Without his live DNA, she would be locked inside the infirmary with no way of getting out. But she couldn’t think that way. She had to believe she could save Cole. She must.

Rhonda leaned against the door and released a long breath. At least, she would have some peace to perform the delicate surgery. The temperature in the medical ward felt much cooler than on the cell blocks. The environmental controls worked independently. She realized how much she had missed the feeling of safety and she savored the luxury of this temporary refuge. A slight tremor shook the surgical ward, reminding her that the planet had other plans, but she let her body relax for a few seconds.

Cole, however, couldn’t wait. The vast surgical ward, equipped with the latest technology, operated largely through an automated system controlled by an independent A.I. Rhonda cleared her voice and announced clearly to the medical A.I. “Prepare new patient for upper right chest microsurgery.” The surgical ward figured among the highest priority areas and had its own emergency power supply. Rhonda desperately needed the machines to work and hoped the depleted power grid

would provide enough energy.

When four spider-like robots came to meet her strange vehicle, Rhonda dared to hope the equipment still functioned. Obviously undeterred by Rhonda's unorthodox Gurney, the many robotic arms and fingers slid under Cole Riggeur, lifted him, and carried him to the surgery room where Rhonda followed them in. When the robots laid Cole gently upon the operating table, the bright lights came on and the screens lit up.

Rhonda pulled away the top part of Cole's uniform and peeled off the ripped undershirt. Blood had saturated the emergency pack.

Cole moaned when she removed it.

"Hang in there, Captain. Don't die on me now." Driven by the need to save his life, Rhonda applied a tourniquet, sterilized his arm with a swab then plugged an IV into his largest vein. After releasing the tourniquet, she injected the drug that would induce painless sleep, Styx, of all things, in the only form Rhonda found acceptable, for medical use. Cole also needed a blood transfusion. "What's Captain Cole Riggeur's blood type?"

"A-negative, Doctor Alendresis," The medical A.I. voice answered calmly.

"Do we have any?"

"No," said the A.I. matter-of-fact.

"How long to make two gallons?"

"Three minutes."

"Then do it, stat."

"Yes, Doctor Alendresis."

Rhonda had to remove Cole's clothes and get him completely sterile while the drug took effect. She pulled off his soft gray boots. The blood had dripped down his body and drenched his right sock.

Carefully, she slid down the bottom part of his uniform. She found the underwear caked with blood. As she pulled it down, she couldn't help but admire Cole's body. What a waste of a splendid man if he were to die. "Decontamination shower," she ordered then stepped away from the table.

From the overhead A.I. unit an antiseptic solution showered the naked body of Cole Riggeur. Rhonda had to scrub as well. She stepped into the Doctor's bathroom, removed her clothes, took a five-second decontaminating shower then slipped on loose-fitting scrubs, surgical mask and gloves. "Is the patient asleep?"

"Yes, Doctor Alendresis."

Adjusting the cap covering her hair, Rhonda stepped back into the operating room. She felt like

a doctor again. It had been a while since she'd performed surgery. She breathed evenly to calm her nerves then gazed down at her patient.

Covered up to the waist by a yellow sheet, Cole looked pale in comparison. Electrodes stuck to his chest and forehead connected him to a bank of monitors. His vital signs, faint but steady, gave Rhonda hope. She hooked the blood tube from the A.I. directly into the vein in Cole's left arm. "Start transfusion," she ordered calmly.

"Transfusion started."

The scanner hovered above Cole. On the main screen, Rhonda could see the internal damage caused to his lungs, brachial conduits and blood vessels. A large hematoma and the beginning of an infection also marred the deep wound. "Inject superantibiotic solution."

"Superantibiotic solution injected," the A.I. mimicked.

Rhonda slipped on a pair of wired operating gloves giving her cybernetic control of the operating unit. Watching the blood vessels closely on the magnification screen, she moved the tiny robotic fingers inside the wound.

With infinite care, she maneuvered the tiny pliers to grab the edges of the collapsed vessels. Patiently, she reattached them then glued the severed edges, like building a boat inside one of the bottles she had seen at the Earth Antiquities Museum. But this was no recreational game, and she couldn't afford to fail. Both their lives depended on how well Rhonda could perform under these difficult circumstances.

When the surgical ward shook from a strong tremor, Rhonda lost control of the robotic surgery fingers, lost her balance and fell down to the yellow floor.

"Dear God, No!" she cried, imagining the damage the sharp instruments must have inflicted inside Cole's lungs. She rose back up to her feet, holding her hands away and trying not to move her gloved fingers.

Quickly, she assessed the damage. More bleeding had occurred, but it could have been worse. *I can do this.* Blocking any interference, Rhonda focused on the only thing that mattered now, saving Cole's life.

## Chapter Nine

### Level Sixteen - Yellow Zone - Surgical Ward

Rhonda hoped no more tremors would shake the operating room during the delicate surgery. Working as fast as she could, she lost herself in the intricate network of the human lung. She reattached severed blood vessels, vacuumed the blood accumulated in the lung bases. No wonder the poor man breathed shallow. She tried not to think about his suffering as she struggled to keep a steady hand.

By the time she finally pulled the skin back over the wound and glued it into place, Rhonda felt exhausted but proud. She could now look with fondness upon Cole who slept peacefully, drugged for hours to come. He would live, and in a few days, if they managed to get out alive, he would scarcely have a scar to show for his heroic deed.

Rhonda removed the electronic gloves and pulled down her surgical mask. “Clothe the Captain in comfortable underwear and move him to a warm bed.”

Immediately, the spidery robots executed the order in a sprightly dance, with all the gentleness due a recovering patient.

Cole would sleep out the drug while his body finished healing. Rhonda had better take advantage of this respite as well. When Cole awoke, she would need her strength for the rest of the journey back to the Garrison. She hoped the other guards had been successful in finding a life pod, and if they found one, she hoped they would wait for her and the Captain.

Rhonda needed to contact the other guards and let them know of the Captain’s recovery. Heaven forbid they would presume him and Rhonda dead and leave without them. Unfortunately, the com system in the infirmary didn’t seem to work. She tapped her comimplant but received only static. Disappointed, she turned on the compad but again failed to find a working transmission channel.

Using the compad, she made sure no convicts lurked on the other side of the disabled door. A small comfort, that, and the fact that the surgical ward was impenetrable, independent in power, and more resistant to earthquakes than the facility itself, thanks to its double set of walls.

At least for the moment, Rhonda felt safe enough from the rabble, although she still doubted she could fall asleep. She must recoup her energy, however. Until Cole awakened she had nothing better to



do, so she pulled off the cap covering her hair and lay down in her scrubs on the bed next to Cole's and closed her eyes.

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### Level Sixteen - Yellow Zone - Maintenance platform

Sniffing the air, Tomar recognized the scent of his prey as he emerged with his crew on the maintenance platform of Level Sixteen, the Yellow Zone. After inspecting the platform to collect more weapons and tools, Tomar led his men down the stairs and made Gramps open the security door to the main floor.

As they emerged in the yellow corridor, Tomar smelled the air and his sharp olfactory sense betrayed him. So many other creature scents of sweat, blood and unwashed bodies mixed with that of the two guards. The odor of refuse and sewage overwhelmed his sensory cells, and he had to stop and collect himself. Tomar didn't like to lose anyone's scent. Which way had the guards gone?

Other convicts in red overalls from Level Nineteen stalked the corridors of the Yellow Zone, provoking and harassing yellow inmates. Tomar rejoiced at that fact. It meant that new passages between floors must have opened, which increased his chances of finding a way up as well. Still sniffing, Tomar could smell several Monacks among the inmates on that level. He looked forward to meeting one of them. His wild instincts had returned since he'd left his cell, and Tomar spoiled for a good fight with a worthy opponent. Another Monack would do just fine.

As Tomar and his gang ambled along the corridors between double rows of cells, some dejected inmates loitering inside the cells glanced at the red-clad convicts with foreboding. Others, still feeling the effect of Styx withdrawal, paid the gang no heed and went on bickering or fighting while their friends placed bets on who would win the confrontation. This level seemed calmer than the Crimson Zone.

Tomar was not surprised when the first large group he encountered had a Monack leader. Most males of his race had an innate need to dominate. Although he wore yellow overalls, the other Monack had gathered red-clad convicts in his gang.

Tomar changed into his fiercest shape that of the stone-gray gargoyle, all claws and fangs extended. The other Monack did the same and hissed at him in the ritual challenge. Around them, inmates rushed out of the way and into the cells, to watch safely behind the protection of the titanium

bars. Tomar could smell their fear and took strength from it.

Although Tomar looked forward to the fight, he wanted to study his opponent, so he didn't leap but advanced menacingly. "Submit or die!"

The other Monack, slightly smaller than Tomar, had the silvery glow of youth on his skin. He puffed up the ridges of his stony face, a common intimidation technique. "Only cowards hesitate to attack."

Tomar knew better than to fall for the old adage. Better take his time and win than rush and fall into a trap. "I am Tomar! Who is my challenger?" By uttering the ritual question, Tomar deliberately forced his opponent to follow the Old Ways and agree to a fight to the death, where no rules applied.

"My name is Kalloum, and like you I honor the Old Ways." The younger Monack exuded pride. "Your reputation precedes you, Tomar, but you do not scare me. I will kill you."

"Good." Tomar grinned. "You are brave, Kalloum. I'll enjoy killing a worthy contender for a change."

The young Monack grew in size then leapt to land on the exact spot where Tomar stood, but Tomar had already sidestepped. He rushed the young Monack and shoved him across the corridor, into the titanium bars of a cell. In the struggle that followed, Tomar grew many tentacles to immobilize Kalloum and pierced his muscular thigh with his claws, but the younger Monack altered his shape into that of a ball and bounced away.

When Kalloum regained his fighting shape, the hole in his leg had already healed. He emitted a dry laugh. "You are too slow, Tomar, too old and rusty."

Tomar suddenly realized he faced a very powerful specimen of his race. He'd underestimated the advantage of youth. Years of inactivity behind bars and daily drugs had not only aged Tomar but affected his reflexes as well. He had better find new strength, or he could lose life and honor.

Suddenly, the contest he'd first seen as mere sport had turned into a matter of survival. Free again, Tomar must start his unending battle to rule according to the Old Ways. The excitement, mixed with the fear of losing, sharpened his senses. He had to prevail.

As he circled the younger Monack warily, Tomar watched for weaknesses. Cocksure, Kalloum tended to leave his left flank open. Was it a ruse? In order to win, Tomar would have to neutralize the other Monack and cut him into several pieces, then into pieces small enough to eat and assimilate before the cells had time to regenerate. The cannibalistic tradition scared the weak who condemned it, but Tomar thrived on the Old Ways.

Although he'd done it countless times, Tomar realized he may not succeed today. A frightening

thought. A beaten Monack eaten by his adversary didn't deserve a warrior's paradise. Tomar started to understand how his previous victims had felt. But a Monack of the Old Ways couldn't allow himself to feel anything but the thrill of the kill and impending victory.

Psyching himself to win, Tomar pounced. A mistake. The younger Monack, faster than Tomar, ducked and rolled away.

Furious, Tomar let his rage take over and leapt, nailing Kalloum to the wall with a spear extended from his arm. Unfortunately, the youth ignored the pain and, rather than retreating, took advantage of Tomar's close proximity to cut off part of the spear, inflicting damage to Tomar's fluid body cells.

Struggling with the pain, Tomar retreated, attempting to regenerate the damaged cells of his mutilated body.

Kalloum grinned and made a show of pulling the spear end out of his body and eating it. If he planned on eating Tomar piece by piece, he could very well win.

Tomar couldn't let him. He knew digesting his amputated flesh would slow his adversary somewhat, so he rushed the youth with claws and started to rip him in two, but Kalloum reacted fluidly then changed into a spoked wheel to escape and use the time to heal his wound, rolling fast along the corridor.

But Tomar could beat the youngster at this game. Shifting into a slightly smaller wheel with deadly protruding blades, he rolled along the corridor at greater speed. When he caught up with his opponent Tomar matched his speed and forced his adversary against a wall. As they touched, still rolling along the wall, Tomar's blades severed the spokes of his opponent's wheel, shredding them in many small pieces.

Stopping to regain his fighting shape, Tomar grabbed each piece and shoved them into his toothy mouth, ripping them with his fangs. He chewed and swallowed as fast as he could, until not a single morsel of the young Monack remained on the yellow floor.

While the other convicts stared in awe, Tomar uttered a guttural victory cry, and the onlookers applauded. This time, experience had won against youth and speed, but now that Tomar had absorbed his opponent, the younger Monack's speed, strength and mass soon would become his, and he would possess the young warrior's qualities from now on.

Tomar saw various articles changing hands as the inmates ventured out of the cells. Some of the convicts had been betting on the outcome of the fight. "Who dared bet against me?"

The convicts looked at each other, fear in their eyes, but none spoke.

Tomar thought of killing those who lost the bets, but he might need them. Besides, Kalloum's men had shown loyalty to their leader and he liked that. "Kneel to your new leader!" he yelled to Kalloum's gang. "And I'll take you with me as we escape this dump."

Obviously relieved for getting away with their lives, Kalloum's followers obeyed, and as they knelt, Tomar went to each of them and extracted their locator chips with one claw, digging a little deeper than he had to, and taking pleasure in inflicting pain.

When Tomar interrogated his new recruits about guards in the area, he heard an interesting story. A robotic cradle containing a wounded guard had crossed the whole floor at great speed, fiercely defended by a female guard. It could only be the Alendresis woman. The vehicle had disappeared on the East side, and Tomar wondered what attracted the guards to that area.

After interrogating many witnesses and following the treads of the vehicle on the yellow floor, Tomar recognized the scent of the two guards and determined their path. He followed their trail and found several bodies and finally stopped in front of the smooth titanium casing of a reinforced door. According to the loitering inmates, the guards had disappeared in there. Tomar could smell them close, but a strong chemical stink mixed with their scent.

Besides a bold black number, the security door had no distinguishing features and Tomar wondered what lay on the other side. It had to be something important. The pungent smell of disinfectant and pharmaceuticals reminded him of a hospital. The bitch had brought Riggeur to an infirmary.

The thought that maybe she intended to treat Captain Riggeur entered his mind, but Tomar rejected the idea. The bitch was only a dumb female guard with a pretty face. She'd probably come in search of pain killers or drugs. Rumor had it that some guards took Styx on a regular basis. They looked down at the inmates, but most guards deserved to be behind bars, unlike Tomar, who only followed the only honorable path, the Old Ways.

The infirmary, however, brought to mind all kinds of possibilities. Tomar could use surgical instruments as weapons, and drugs, especially Styx, could come in handy. He could persuade hundreds of convicts to work for him if he had control of that stash of drugs.

Gramps caressed the smooth door with veined hands as if feeling for an imperfection that wasn't there. "You want me to open *this* door?"

"How did you guess?" Tomar's good mood altered suddenly. "Is there a problem?"

"This is a special door, tougher than the others." Gramps shook his head with dismay. "There is no visible panel. I can't access the wires. Must be something valuable inside."

“Valuable indeed.” Tomar felt his patience wane. “How fast can you open it?”

“I’m not sure I can.”

Tomar groaned. “You better be sure, little man.”

“But the controls are on the other side and the door is made of smooth titanium.” Gramps’ tone grew whiny. “And if, as I suspect, the door has been disabled. It may not be possible to open it at all.”

“Not possible?” Tomar didn’t want to hear that. But, of course, the guards must have known the infirmary presented a refuge. “They must feel very safe inside. But they can’t stay in there forever.”

“We could wait them out and ambush them.” Gramps smiled at his idea.

“No. They’ll be armed and alert when they come out on their own. Better to catch them unaware.” Tomar studied the forbidding door. “Is there another exit or entrance to that infirmary?”

“No. I don’t think there is, Fierce Leader.”

“Good. Any bright ideas how we can take this stronghold? Think hard, Gramps, how is this thing rigged?”

Gramps rubbed his forehead with bony fingers. “If we can’t wire the door open, we could use the power tools from the maintenance bay and try to cut a small hole in it to reach the panel. But it might be easier to cut through the wall itself.”

Tomar sent his team searching for the necessary tools. “And bring a few robots as well. I may have a use for them.”

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Rhonda awoke screaming in a cold sweat. In her nightmare, the devil himself dangled her by the ankles above a black abyss. When she realized where she lay, still wearing the yellow surgical scrubs, it didn’t make her feel any better. The cooler temperature of the infirmary had risen slightly.

On the bed next to hers, Cole slept peacefully. His skin had regained a healthy glow, and Rhonda rejoiced at the prospect of his conscious company. The man had his flaws, but she found his heroic qualities quite endearing.

If Rhonda’s scream hadn’t awakened him, however, Cole must still be under the influence of the drug. It would take a few more hours before he awoke, and when he did, the after effects of the Styx would keep him disoriented for a while.

Rhonda wondered what had awakened her. The noise from the prison and its demented convicts didn’t reach inside the infirmary. She checked on her compad and didn’t see any inmate activity in the

area. Still, something had jolted her awake.

When a tremor rumbled and shook the surgical instruments that jingled in their metal holders, Rhonda understood why she had awakened. Another earthquake!

Stronger than the previous temblors, this one lasted longer and threatened to crush the reinforced walls of the surgical complex. Rhonda needed to move the Captain to a safer area. She hadn't saved his life to see him killed by falling rubble. The archway between the surgery and the recovery room seemed reinforced by titanium beams. It would have to do.

Rising, Rhonda tried to push the Captain's bed but realized it was bolted to the floor. God Almighty! She'd forgotten that dumb security measure to prevent recovering criminals from using the beds to make barricades.

She didn't dare move Cole by herself. Any jerky motion could upset the fresh glue mending his upper chest. The robots would do a better job. "Move Captain Riggeur to the entryway," she ordered in her professional voice.

The spidery robots remained in their cradles and didn't come out to help. The last tremor had probably disconnected the medical A.I. Fetching a Gurney from the supply room, Rhonda brought it next to Cole's bed.

She activated the automatic bed feature. The frame purred and the mattress extended sideways over the Gurney. Pushing the next button released the mattress, along with the sleeping Cole, as gently and quietly as if the machine operated on a cloud. Then Rhonda unhooked his I.V. He wouldn't need it anymore. She rolled the Captain's Gurney under the wide reinforced archway between the surgery and the recovery room.

Satisfied Cole would be safe, with nothing to do until he awoke, Rhonda returned to the scrub room and threw their gray uniforms into a cleansing unit for a full cycle. Both would be ready when the Captain awoke.

Rhonda headed back toward the archway to check on Cole when a violent shake threw her off balance. The lights dimmed. She grabbed the edge of a high metal shelf supporting a bank of monitors. Unfortunately, the large shelf broke away from the wall and fell, flattening Rhonda under the thick sheet of metal and a pile of broken equipment. More debris crashed on top of the shelf, and Rhonda felt grateful for the shield of the protective metal.

When the tremor had passed, Rhonda wedged herself to lift the shelf and realized with horror that she couldn't. Something heavy must have fallen over it, and Rhonda lay confined under a mound of rubble, buried alive in darkness, like in a tight coffin. Darkness...

She tried to change position, but a sharp pain lanced her shoulder. Her scrub top seemed snagged on something. She couldn't move at all. Trapped like a rat in a dead-end pipe, she thought with growing anxiety. Rhonda found it difficult to breathe and impossible to think. Not enough light, not enough air. She would surely die under here. Panic and despair seized her and she couldn't help but sob and cry softly, "Help!"

But she knew no one out there would come to rescue her.

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The shake caught Tomar and his team as they experimented with an assortment of tools from the maintenance bay, in hopes of cutting a hole in the door.

"Fuck the Gods of the Old Ways!" Tomar brushed off his red overalls. Dust now filled the corridor.

Gramps sat on the dirty yellow floor, scratching his grizzled head. "I heard something fall behind that door. Something big and heavy. Even if we ever open it, we'll probably find a collapsed wall on the other side. This place is falling apart. Maybe we should just forget about the guards and find our own way out. I'm sure this big shake opened more fissures between the floors."

Tomar had no patience for the weasel of a man. "Are you questioning my orders?"

Gramps paled. "In no way, Fierce Leader. I was just suggesting, but obviously I was mistaken."

"Mistaken indeed." Tomar advanced upon Gramps. "Remind me why I keep you alive?"

"You need me to open the doors, Fierce Leader." Gramps' eyes rounded with fear and his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed hard.

"But you just proved useless as you can't open this one. And conventional tools don't seem to work either." Tomar enjoyed the fear in the old man's face. "We need these two guards in order to open the other doors and you know it."

"But, Fierce Leader, if we can't get to the guards, I merely suggested we find another way out. Maybe through the maintenance tunnels and the mineshaft..."

"You suggested?" Tomar's gave his tone a menacing edge. "Who gave you license to think?"

"I apologize, Fierce Leader. It won't happen again."

"Indeed, it will never happen again." Tomar grinned. "I don't need you anymore."

"Please, Fierce Leader. You will find me useful in many ways." Gramps stepped back hesitantly, glancing right and left for an escape. "I am a skilled engineer."

Relishing the smell of fear emanating from Gramps' skin, Tomar signaled his men to block his retreat, and they moved into place. Then Tomar advanced on the old man and grabbed his shoulder. The Monack's claws pierced the brittle ribs and Gramps screamed as his blood gushed onto the dusty floor.

Digging deep, Tomar clutched the beating organ in his claws, then he ripped it out and let go of Gramps, who fell like a limp puppet on the floor. Tomar held up the beating heart like an offering. "To you, Gods of the Old Ways. May you smile on me again!" Then he bit into the firm flesh and chewed it with gusto. As his men stared in fearful silence, Tomar finished his treat then kicked Gramps' bleeding carcass out of the way.

"Get back to work." He lengthened his tongue to lick the sweet blood off his fangs. "It's an infirmary behind that door, and some of you may need to disinfect that chip hole."

The words effectively prompted the men to work faster.

"We need to get the guards before they die and their blood is too old to give us fresh DNA."

Tomar didn't even mention the trickier part. He needed the code from them as well, but his true goal was revenge. No one, however, needed to know that. Too much knowledge might encourage more of his men to think for themselves, and he wanted them to obey him blindly. After Gramps' execution, they no doubt would.

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Cole stretched in his bed, in a euphoric state, feeling no pain at all. Had it all been a terrible nightmare? Would he awaken in his quarters before the morning call? As he opened his eyes, he wished that would be the case but did not recognize his surroundings. At least he felt whole and in perfect health, so he could rule out his torture by Tomar as a bad dream, although it had felt very real at the time.

As he pondered that puzzle, amused by its complexity, Cole heard a faint cry, like that of a small animal, or maybe it was sobbing, coming from another room. What room? Where was he?

He tossed the blanket and discovered he wore standard issue long johns. He chuckled. Who had dressed him in these silly duds and why? Was he in yet another dream? His mind found it difficult to make sense of anything.

Lightheaded, unsteady on his legs, Cole followed the sound and ended up in the room where he thought he'd heard a crying sound. At first sight, the place looked like a mess of discarded broken



equipment in a pile of rubble. “Rubble?” He giggled. Funny word, “rubble.” He rolled it on his tongue to see how it felt. “Rubble.” He smiled as it tickled his lazy tongue. “Rubble.”

“Cole? Er.. Captain?” The faint voice sounded familiar and came from the bottom of the heap.

Cole crouched and saw a hand sticking out of the pile of debris. He took it and felt a responding squeeze. “Who is this?” He liked this guessing game.

“It’s Rhonda. Please, help me out.”

Pushing away obstructing debris, Cole peered under the edge of a large metal shelf and vaguely recognized the face encrusted with dust and rivulets of dry tears. He smiled. “Rhonda? What are you doing under there? And why in hell are you wearing yellow?”

“Am I glad to see you, Captain.”

“Why don’t you come out and play?”

“I’m stuck.”

“I get it. You are in my dream.” No wonder nothing made sense. Cole was still dreaming. “But if you want me to play your game, you have to call me Cole.”

“What? But Captain...”

“I insist. Or I won’t play with you.”

“All right. Cole, please, help me out of here.”

“Now, that’s better. Don’t worry, I’ll get you out of those yellow clothes.” As long as he was dreaming, it wouldn’t hurt to act out one of his secret fantasies.

## Chapter Ten

### Level Sixteen - Surgical Ward - Yellow Zone

Too frustrated, Rhonda couldn't laugh at Cole's silliness. She wondered how much time had passed while she lay trapped under her metal shield with little chance of rescue. She remembered crying for a while then drifting into sleep. Had he recovered enough to help her? She doubted he could do much in his drug-altered state.

Good thing Cole had cleared the debris in front of her face. Rhonda now had a breathing hole. She edged her face closer to the small opening to see him better and winced as the motion pulled her hair. "You mustn't strain yourself or your wound will reopen."

"What wound?" He sat cross-legged on the floor in his long johns, patted her extended hand and chuckled. "Oh, I get it. I'm still in the dream."

"A dream?" Rhonda realized he'd lost touch with reality. His mind didn't seem to work right. Her shoulders ached and something sharp snagged the top of her surgical smock. She tried to worm away from it but only scratched her shoulder. "Sorry, Captain, but that was no dream. You were wounded, and I did operate on you a few hours ago. We are in the surgery ward on Level Sixteen."

"Right. That was the dream." He brushed dust off the yellow floor with his fingers. "Yellow Zone." He frowned. "And please call me Cole." Shaking his head, he looked around him in obvious amazement. "This place is a real mess."

Rhonda reached with her only free hand and grabbed his bare foot to get his attention. "How much rubble is on top of me?" She didn't want to think of what would happen if it shifted.

Scratching his head, Cole looked up and squinted. "I'd say about two or three tons." He shrugged. "Maybe ten."

"That much?" Rhonda forced herself to relax and take a deep breath. She couldn't give in to despair. "How about you find something to pry up this metal shelf. All I need is a few centimeters of free space to crawl out of here."

"Craawwll..." Cole smiled as if the word amused him immensely. His pupils looked dilated. Definitely the effects of the drug.

“But be careful. You don’t have your strength back, yet.”

“Carreffull...” He stared at her but didn’t make a move to help.

This was no use. Cole just didn’t make much sense. Rhonda wanted to scream at him but reminded herself she must remain calm. So she took a few slow breaths and released the tension as she exhaled, her favorite martial arts technique to find her center. Once calmer, she convinced herself she’d just have to be patient and wait until he regained his logic.

As she observed Cole, Rhonda wished she had a recorder. Cole acted like a cute drunk. If their situation weren’t so serious, she’d find his behavior amusing. Right now, Mr. All-business-and-no-fun looked rather charming, like an innocent child. She tried to smile. “Maybe we can talk.” Talking usually helped alleviate her anxiety.

“Talk is good.” A far cry from the guarded Cole who avoided personal questions.

“What do you remember?”

“From the dream?”

“It’s not a dream.”

“If you insist...” He brought his face down close to the opening and whispered, “You were very brave.”

“Brave?” The thought pleased Rhonda, but she suspected Cole would never have said that if it weren’t for his drugged condition. “Do you remember the Monack?”

Cole nodded gravely. “You said you killed him and then you saved me. We escaped with Javel and Xerna. You refused to abandon me. I remember that.” He smiled and shook his finger at her. “Stubborn.”

Rhonda answered his smile as she realized his recollection of the events remained clear, but he believed the experience to be a nightmare. Curiously, she enjoyed talking to the uninhibited Cole. *In Vino Veritas*, the truth is in the wine, as the old saying went. The drug acted almost like a truth serum.

Since there was nothing she could do until Cole recovered from the Styx, Rhonda needed a distraction to forget her awful situation. The next quake could crush her or bury her completely. To occupy her mind, she might as well satisfy her curiosity about Cole.

“Who was the child in the hologram you were watching when I called you in your quarters?” The words conjured the image of Cole, naked in the soft light of his bathroom. It seemed so long ago.

Cole’s face remained unconcerned. “My son.”

Rhonda didn’t know Cole ever had a lasting relationship, even less that he’d fathered a child. “I didn’t realize you had a son.”

Cole chuckled. “Neither did I, until recently. Never saw him.”

“What’s his name?” Rhonda felt maternal all of a sudden.

“Liam. My wife’s ancestors were Irish, an ancient tribe from Earth.”

Rhonda tried to shift to a better position under her shelf, but her narrow cage didn’t allow for it.

“How could you not know you had a child?”

“His mother was pregnant when we divorced, but she never told me.”

Rhonda had no idea Cole had been married and divorced. She could only imagine him as a workaholic bachelor. “And she kept your child from you? Isn’t that illegal?”

“Not on Upsilon Three.” His smile carried regrets.

“Can’t you visit him there?”

“No.” He grimaced. “His mother made sure of that.”

“Does he know anything about his father?”

“I doubt it.”

Rhonda felt sorry for him. “Don’t worry. When he gets old enough, he’ll come looking for you. It’s in the blood.”

“I hope so.” He spoke easily, as if the drug numbed the emotional pain as well. “The last time I trusted a woman, she broke my heart and destroyed my life. I barely survived the divorce.”

“What kind of wife does that?” Rhonda found herself hating the woman who did such a cruel thing. She also wished she could bring Cole comfort, but her predicament didn’t allow it.

Cole shook his head. “Funny, though. I always thought I had a good marriage while it lasted. How blind can you be?”

Rhonda tried to move a cramping muscle, in vain. She felt trapped and controlled the insidious panic that tried to overcome her. She hid her fear under a grin. “What happened?”

Cole shrugged. “All of a sudden, she turned on me because the job took me away from home for six weeks at a time. She always knew that would be the case. Is that a reason to leave? Whatever happened to loyalty? You can’t trust women.” He glanced at her and chuckled. “Present company excepted.”

As Rhonda started to understand Cole’s deep-rooted mistrust of women, she couldn’t help feeling flattered. He’d made her the exception. So, he did respect her after all. “How did you find out you had a son?”

“By accident, when Duran updated my records after my last promotion. He’s eleven now, but all I have of him is a holorecording taken when he was three.”

Rhonda recalled the holoplay Cole was watching when she'd interrupted his morning ritual. She calculated that Cole must have married very young, probably his first love.

"You know what the sad part is, though?" He looked away, as if entranced by the memory. "I always wanted kids, and I miss him. Don't you want kids?"

"I never thought about it." Rhonda tended to think in terms of relationships rather than marriage. "But now that you mention it, my big house on Banoi would feel empty without a family in it." Seeing Cole more coherent, Rhonda asked, "How are you feeling?"

"A little stronger." He rose to his feet and walked out of sight.

Rhonda heard him foray into the debris. "Find anything?" she yelled.

"Maybe." He came back with a length of pipe elbowed like a crow bar and wedged it under the rim of the metal shelf.

"Watch out. Don't exert yourself," Rhonda warned. If he reopened the wound, she probably couldn't fix him up again. Even with her limited view, she could tell the infirmary had suffered from the last quakes.

"Get ready!"

Banishing the thought that the load above her head could shift and crush her in the rescue process, Rhonda took a deep breath and released it slowly. "I'm ready."

As Cole applied pressure on the long end of the pipe, Rhonda heard the metal groan, but the shelf didn't budge.

"It's going to take more strength than I have." Cole didn't sound concerned.

"Try engineering rather than force." She didn't want him to risk a serious injury.

Another tremor rumbled through the infirmary, unsettling the pile above Rhonda's head. Terrified, Rhonda willed herself not to scream.

"Get ready," Cole yelled. "The tremor might help. I'll try again."

As the floor shook, Rhonda saw Cole strain against the pipe, using it as a lever. The pipe broke, and more rubble fell down and obstructed Rhonda's small window. Trapped in the dark, scared and discouraged, Rhonda realized the next quake would bury her alive if this one hadn't already, and she felt her panic growing. But she couldn't allow herself to lose control again, so she ground her teeth not to break into sobs.

Cole swept away the debris in front of her breathing hole and she welcomed the sight of his face. "Are you all right in there?"

"I think so." It was all she could do not to cry.

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As Cole's mind started to clear, he could now discern the harsh reality, and his ability to focus gradually returned. He needed to get Rhonda out of her predicament and fast, before the next quake. The poor thing looked as scared as a kitten trapped in a drainpipe, and he couldn't blame her.

Cole's body seemed to respond to his command, and apart from a slight tingle in his upper right chest, he felt fully functional. He knew he took a risk of reopening the wound by straining himself, but Rhonda couldn't wait much longer. "Hold on, I'll get you out of there."

Spotting the robot Rhonda had converted to transport him, he wondered whether he could use its power. How many tons could a robot move? He wouldn't know until he tried.

Cole couldn't just pull out the shelf or the rubble would collapse upon Rhonda. He had to rig some makeshift crane to lift up one side so she could crawl out. A metal beam protruding from the wall might do the trick. "Any idea where I can find some really strong cable in this place?"

"Let me think." Rhonda made an obvious effort to sound calm. "There was some holding the module over the operating table, if it's accessible." A small thread of hope had just crept into her voice.

"I'll get it." Cole couldn't help thinking that if the cable broke, the fall of the loaded shelf would kill Rhonda for sure. The image of her crushed body oozing blood from under a pile of debris flashed through his mind. Cole shuddered. He had to save her.

A quick look around the facility showed him the door, blocked by unmovable debris. If that was the only way in and out, they were both locked up inside the infirmary. The other rooms hadn't fared well either.

The surgical unit looked a shamble. The equipment had collapsed on the operating table, and the long cable, which suspended the instruments module from the ceiling, had fallen and lay like a dusty snake on top of the broken equipment.

Cole pulled on the cable, still attached to the broken module, but it didn't come loose. "I need tools," he yelled from the surgical room.

"In the metal drawer-chest," Rhonda answered, with more strength than he expected.

Cole struggled to push the broken operating arms out of the way so he could open the drawers. The sight of the shiny surgical instruments lined up inside warmed his heart. He could work with that kind of tools. Medical drills with all kinds of attachments, scalpels, scissors, chipping and sculpting knives. He shuddered at the thought of their medical use and focused on his immediate need. When he realized the cable was a thick metal rope with a vinyl cover, he rejoiced and unscrewed it from the

operating module.

Proud of his find, he took the cable, along with a drill from the chest then returned to the room where Rhonda remained trapped. Drilling a small hole into the edge of the duranium shelf proved a slow and difficult process. He had to proceed carefully or the drill would heat up, and he had to wait until it cooled to go on.

After dulling three drill bits, Cole finally managed to pierce the hard metal plate. Then he looped the cable through the hole and over the large titanium beam protruding from the adjacent wall. He attached the end of the cable to the robot, tightened the cable, double-checked his handiwork and said, "Get ready. We have to time this right."

"Believe me, I've been ready to get out of here for at least a day."

"I don't know how long the cable will hold, or even if this is going to work at all, but we have to take a chance." Cole took a look at the frightened face staring back at him through the end of the shelf and pushed down his own fear to make his words reassuring. "I'm going to pull you out. If this works, you must come out and get away as fast as you can. Got it? I'll be there to catch you."

Rhonda nodded and exhaled a loud breath. "Ready."

Full of misgivings, Cole pushed the on button on the robot. The engine's clicking noise reverberated on the hard walls as the caterpillar treads fought for traction on the smooth floor. The cable tensed and stretched. The beam moaned under the pressure. The edge of the shelf bowed but the shelf itself didn't lift up.

While the robot strained against the load, Cole grabbed Rhonda's hand and pulled.

"Wait! I'm stuck on something."

"We don't have time. It's now or never."

The shelf itself creaked as it lifted ever so slightly. Cole pulled Rhonda with all his might. When her body started to slide forward, her head emerged. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled some more. He heard something rip but focused solely on getting her away before the loaded shelf collapsed.

As he grabbed her waist, he lifted her to him and fell back, just as the robot lost its traction and overturned. The weight of the rubble flattened the shelf to the floor in a deafening crash.

Heart beating fast, blood rushing through his arteries. Cole lay on the hard floor, holding on to Rhonda in a desperate grasp. He felt her grab onto him as well. Her top had ripped and showed some skin. He closed his eyes, aware of her smaller body pulsing against his. Neither made a move to loosen their embrace.

His breath came short and so did hers. He wondered whether it was from pure fright, the fear of

losing each other, or the mere proximity of two warm bodies. He felt her move against him and opened his eyes as she looked up at him with a soft expression he'd never seen on her face before.

"I owe you my life, again." She brought her lips close to his. Her sweet breath so near, so tantalizing seemed to demand a kiss. "Thank you, Cole."

At the sound of his name, said with such tenderness, Cole couldn't help himself. He covered her soft lips salty from crying. When she opened them to return his kiss, the taste of her mouth awakened a secret desire in his loins, like a long forgotten ache. He realized he wanted her, had wanted her for a long time.

How had he managed to deny his feelings before? But the more surprising thing was that she paid him that kind of attention at all. He'd always thought she hated him. Then again, he'd never given her any reason to like him and he wondered why. As he held her tight, he found himself unwilling to let go of her.

Hearing another rumble, however, Cole reluctantly released Rhonda, helped her up, and they ran for the cover of the wide arch under which the Gurney still stood. Beside him, Rhonda looked frightened. A large tear in the front of her yellow scrubs exposed her left breast. She tried to close the rip self-consciously, but the brief sight of her creamy skin had already aroused Cole. By now he felt certain Rhonda regretted the kiss and wanted to move on.

When the tremor receded, Cole cleared his throat. "Is there another way out of the infirmary than the front door?" He tried to sound business-like.

Rhonda shook her head while trying to mend her scrubs top with pins from a medical kit. "This place is like a bunker. Only one exit." She looked up. "Why the question?"

"The door is blocked by debris. I don't know if we can clear it up."

"Can we use the robot?"

Cole went to the door to evaluate the task. He'd seen the robot at work and it could barely lift the loaded shelf a few centimeters to free Rhonda. To make things worse, the last quake had dropped more blocks of duracrete on top of the debris blocking the door, and Cole couldn't imagine any way of clearing that up. He could only see patches of the metal door through wide gaps in the pile.

Rhonda came behind him and laid a hand on his shoulder. "Can we access the control panels?"

"Negative, but we have to give it a try." He didn't mention to Rhonda that even if they reached the panels and they still worked, the door probably wouldn't open. The frame seemed to have shifted during a quake, and the mechanism would likely be stuck, mainly with the pile applying pressure on the door.



Nevertheless, each on one side of the door, they feverishly tugged and shoved pieces of debris in the hope of reaching the control panels.

Cole could now see the scanner on his side and reached through the small hole. “I think I can slip my hand on the scanner.”

Rhonda threw away a small pipe that clinked down the pile. “And I almost have access to the numerical pad.” She grunted. “Got it.”

Cole applied his hand to the scanner on his side while she punched in her code. The light above the door lit up and the mechanism chimed, but as Cole feared, the door remained tightly closed. “Do you have any tools that could pierce titanium?”

Rhonda shook her head dejectedly. “We are trapped in here. There is no other way out. We are going to die.”

“Don’t be so glum. At least we have each other. Besides, the next quake could unblock the door, or breach the wall.” Cole returned to the arched shelter. “We just have to wait for the next opportunity and be ready when it comes. In the meantime, we have to stay alive and strong.” Cole pulled the mattress off the Gurney and laid it on the floor then he rolled the Gurney out of the way. “This arch is our only safe refuge for now. Let’s get organized for a siege.”

“A siege?” The questioning look on her face betrayed her lack of military training.

Cole found her so lovely in her innocence. He smiled reassuringly. “We might be here for a while longer. Is there food? Water? Clothes, light equipment, emergency supplies we can gather?”

“Yes, of course.”

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Clearing a path to the supply room, Rhonda found comfort in Cole’s positive approach to their crisis. He was right. The frequent quakes that kept re-arranging the complex would eventually break the door or the walls. She only hoped it wouldn’t take too long. If the guards on the surface had managed to find or assemble a life pod, they wouldn’t wait forever.

Smiling against all odds, she wondered at the wisdom of her bold, spontaneous move earlier. Not only she had offered Cole a kiss but he’d responded in kind, and she’d felt his arousal through the thick long johns he wore. Did he really want her? Would she dare hope that he shared that fuzzy feeling she had for him? In the midst of their horrible plight, a bright flame burned that made her spirits rise. Could it be love?

The prospect of the next hours alone with Cole made her forget their predicament. She reached the supply cabinet and snatched a few emergency packs, some superantibiotics, medications for Cole, and medical Styx, in case he experienced complications or pain from his surgery. She also found floodlights. The memory of the recent incident in the maintenance tunnels made the hair on her nape rise in retrospect. Never again did she want to find herself trapped in total darkness.

Rhonda stuffed everything into a sanitary garbage bag then went to the food supply storage, where she borrowed a dozen sealed meals and added them to the loot. Shoving two gallons of mineral water under each arm, she dragged the bag back to the shelter of the archway and reached it just as Cole returned from the surgery room carrying a drawer filled with surgical instruments.

“Tools,” he explained with a grin.

Rhonda smiled and stored the sack on one side of the small room. “We need our clothes. I’ll be right back.” She returned through the collapsed room where she’d agonized under the broken shelf, caught powerless, like an animal. To think that she could have ended up crushed under all that rubble...

She climbed over the pile to find her way into the decontamination room. She had to shove the door with her shoulder and could only open it halfway. There, she retrieved their uniforms, weapons, belts, boots, and the Captain’s compad. She wrapped them up in sheets then she added clean underwear and scrubs, although she wasn’t sure they would need all that.

She thought of changing her ripped top but thought better of it. The partially pinned tear looked kind of sexy and right now, it pleased her.

Upon her return to their shelter, both smiled at their booty, piled up on one side of the arch.

“I’m hungry. Got anything to eat?” Cole dropped to the mattress as if expecting to be served.

Rhonda didn’t mind. She dug into the sack and held up two wrapped meals. “Hospital food. Not tasty but healthy.” She picked a gallon of water and brought the feast to the mattress.

The low illumination coming from the wrecked rooms on each side of the wide arch created an almost romantic atmosphere. Rhonda savored this little haven of peace, even if they were trapped in it, even if it was only for a while, even if they may die here, soon. For now, it felt as cozy as a home.

## Chapter Eleven

Infirmery, Level Sixteen, Yellow Zone

Despite their dire circumstances, Cole's smile brought Rhonda a measure of comfort. He crossed his legs on the mattress and leaned back against the arched wall. Closing his eyes, he seemed to savor the peaceful respite. "How come a beautiful woman like you never settled down?"

"Beautiful, you said?" The word triggered Rhonda's smile.

Cole nodded. "But you don't strike me as the adventurous type."

"Got that right." Rhonda unwrapped the two dinner trays. "I'm more of an artist. Never found the right guy, I guess."

"Or you scared him off." Cole chuckled and accepted one tray.

"Sorry the food is cold." She shrugged in apology.

"It'll do." Cole attacked his food and nodded approval. "Most men say they like free spirits but it's a lie. They feel threatened by independent women and only want to control them."

She sat facing him on the mattress and started to eat the tasteless protein rich stew with the disposable silverware. "Do free spirits scare you, too?"

"Nah. I just avoid women by choice. Mainly the attractive ones. Don't want to get involved with anyone." He looked down and pushed his food around the compartmented tray. "At least that was the case until you came along." He scoffed. "Not that I didn't try to avoid you, too."

A warm glow flushed Rhonda's cheeks at the realization that Cole desired her. She drank from the water jug in an attempt to hide her excitement. She felt tipsy, as if she'd been drinking fine wine from a crystal glass. The traces of drug still in his system made Cole unusually communicative, and she hoped he would clarify his feelings. If she was falling for him, she needed to know how he felt about her.

"Did you ever break the law? I mean in a big way." She immediately regretted the abrupt question.

"What kind of question is that?" he asked through a mouthful.

"Indulge me. If we are going to die, this is our last chance to tell the truth." She smiled

engagingly. “So, did you?”

He shook his head. “Nope, not me. I’m afraid I’m one of these boring people who believe in order. Without it the world would be chaos.”

“Ha! And what do you call this mess your precious order got us in?” She shrugged. “I should’ve known. You are Mr. Perfect, aren’t you?”

“I used to think I was.” He sighed. “But since I’ve paired up with you on this mission, I’ve broken more rules than in my entire life.”

“Feels good, doesn’t it? I find it liberating.”

“Not me. Each time, it’s a tough decision.” He chuckled down more food. “I could never enjoy it. I did it only to save the lives of those who matter the most to me.”

“You mean the guards?”

“They have become my family.” He drank and sighed as he set down the water jug on the floor beside the mattress. “But you are the only guard I can help right now.” He winked. “And you don’t even obey my orders half the time.”

Rhonda wouldn’t let him off the hook so easily. “If you never did anything remotely questionable, then tell me your deepest secret.”

“Like what?” He chuckled. “My deep-rooted fears?”

She found it difficult to believe that anything frightened him at all. “Please tell me. What exactly scares you the most?”

Cole thought for a moment. “I fear dying alone.” He reached for her hand and looked deep into her eyes. “If we die here, at least we’ll have each other.”

The seriousness of his tone prompted Rhonda to squeeze his hand. She wanted to get close to him.

“You keep surprising me.” He relaxed and leaned back against the wall. “I like that. You showed incredible courage for a woman. What you did for me wasn’t only very brave but selfless. You could have saved yourself but you chose to help me instead. I never thanked you for that. I’m very grateful. Even if we only have a few hours to live.”

“Don’t put me on a pedestal.” Rhonda wondered how much she could really tell him. Would he condemn her if she confessed how she avenged her sister? And what if they escaped Zurin Five alive? Could she face the legal consequences of her actions? But if she were to die soon, confiding the truth might set her conscience free. “I’m far from perfect.”

“You mean undisciplined, talkative?” He seemed to enjoy teasing her.

Rhonda decided to dive in. “Since you told me your greatest fear, I’ll share with you my darkest secret.” She smiled to soften the blow. “I didn’t always abide by the law.”

Incredulous mirth played in his deep blue eyes. “You? A criminal?”

“Of some kind.” She hesitated. “Had Duran caught me, I could be one of these convicts out there right now.”

“And a smart criminal to boot.” Cole straightened his back and his gaze intensified into a stare. “Pray tell. I want to know the person I’m dying with, the person who saved my life. The person I pulled out of the rubble so I wouldn’t die alone.”

Rhonda took a deep breath and released it slowly. “My sister was a prisoner on Level Seven.”

“Was?” He focused on her so completely, he didn’t seem to breathe.

“She died of an overdose of Styx, a few months back.” Rhonda struggled to slow the rush of painful memories.

“I’m sorry.” Cole looked genuinely touched. “No wonder you feel so strongly against drugging inmates. Were you and your sister close?”

“Not really.” Rhonda managed to control the sadness threatening to overwhelm her. “I didn’t approve of her life choices, but we loved each other very much.”

Cole looked at her askance. “How does that make you a criminal?”

“I was devastated, so angry at the corporation when she died.” Rhonda still hesitated. “I sabotaged a whole shipment of Styx. It exploded in the cargo bay of the unmanned shuttle on its way to the spaceport.” There, she’d freed her soul and felt suddenly lighter. She searched Cole’s face for a sign of understanding.

Cole whistled. “I may have to revise my judgment about you. You can behave like an adventurer on occasion.” He chuckled. “And I’ve seen you in action.”

Relieved that he didn’t judge her harshly, Rhonda breathed easier. “Saved your life, didn’t I?”

“You sure did, kiddo.” His devilish grin told her he expected her to call him on the nickname.

But Rhonda felt in a forgiving mood. “You sure you don’t hate me for what I did to the Corporation?”

He shook his head. “At least, you didn’t hurt or kill anyone. You only struck back at those who betrayed your sister, avenging your family.”

“But you, Mr. Perfect, would never do such a thing.”

“Oh, I don’t know anymore. It would depend on the circumstances. I was lucky I never had reason or opportunity.”

“Assuming we get out of here alive, what will you do with the rest of your life?” Rhonda prayed he wouldn’t avoid the question.

“I want to meet my son, Liam, get to know him. I sure don’t want to work for Duran anymore. These corporate bastards have no loyalty.”

“Would you settle down?”

“Maybe, if I found the right person.” He paused, eyes downcast then glanced up at her with a glimmer of hope. “What about you?”

“After my sister died, I inherited the family estate on Banoi. That’s where I wanted to spend the rest of my days, painting and listening to music.”

“A medic and an artist?”

“Art is my true passion. I received a substantial offer for several paintings just before my sister died...” Rhonda forced a smile in an attempt to erase the sad thought. “With the right man, who knows? I might even want children.”

Cole’s intense blue eyes lit up at the word. “Are you sure that kind of life would be enough for you? You have such fire.”

“I’ve been dreaming of that life for years now.” As she gazed up at him, her smile came easily. “I noticed your choice of music when I called you early that morning. You have excellent taste.” It felt like weeks ago instead of days.

“I enjoy the small pleasures of life. Good food, good wine, good music.” He laughed. “None of it here tonight. But the good company makes up for the rest.” His quiet smile told how much he appreciated her being there.

Rhonda had never felt so close to anyone. This man, who had irritated her to no end since she joined the Garrison, now seemed to understand and accept her like no one ever did. She moved closer to caress his cheek. He stroked her hair gently, and she laid her head on his shoulder.

“This could be the last time we enjoy human warmth,” Rhonda whispered. The thought made her shiver. No matter the repercussions if they survived this ordeal, right here, right now, she wanted to bond with him. She looked up into his deep blue gaze then touched his lips with a light finger. “What are you thinking?”

“If I tell you,” his arm tightened around her waist, “you sure we can live with the consequences of what I have in mind?”

“If we do live through this, I couldn’t care less about the consequences.” She snuggled closer to him. “Do you?”

His chuckle stopped when she kissed the base of his neck. He lifted her chin and gazed into her eyes then took her offered mouth with a hunger she'd never suspected in him. She felt transported by his ardent kiss and clung to him with the same desperation.

As he pulled back, she murmured, "Don't stop now."

"I don't want to rush it," he whispered in her ear.

Neither did she. "But we may not have much time."

It would take much willpower to contain the flood of desire rushing through her. She carefully opened the top of his full body long johns and caressed the scar on his upper right chest. It felt smooth under her fingers and it looked pink and healthy. She deposited a string of soft kisses around it.

As Cole shuddered and reclined on the mattress, Rhonda knew his moan didn't come from pain.

She stretched out next to him and let her hand roam on the hard muscles of his smooth torso. "How do you keep such a perfect tan living underground?"

He chuckled. "It's permanent. A side-effect of several generations raised on Upsilon Three."

"I like it."

"Glad you do, kiddo," Cole said tenderly. He rose on one elbow and fumbled with the top of her scrubs like an adolescent on his first date. She'd never imagined him to be shy or clumsy and found it endearing in such an otherwise accomplished man.

She suddenly realized Cole called her kiddo to let her know he cared. She kissed his bare shoulder. "Are you nervous?"

"Ouch." He'd pricked himself with the pins closing the tear.

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, hell." He grabbed the torn edge of the scrub top and ripped it all the way from shoulder to waist, the dry sound filling their small space.

Rhonda laughed with delight. "Impatient? I like that in a man." She could hardly contain her own urge to see all of him.

He stared down at her naked breasts. "Would you look at you!"

Rhonda never thought of herself as an exceptional beauty, but Cole's unbridled admiration certainly made her feel like one. She reveled in the glow of his worshiping gaze. "You like it?"

"I want it all." He cupped her breasts firmly and engulfed one nipple into his warm mouth, tormenting it with tongue and teeth.

Rhonda arched under the wave of lust washing over her. But she yearned for more. She wanted to forget that they would soon die a horrible death. She needed to drown herself in passion and pleasure.

She craved Cole, and if they died here tonight, by God she would be in his arms at the height of passion when it happened.

She felt the erection swelling his long johns and feverishly peeled them down from his waist. The image of the Greek god she'd glimpsed in his bathroom returned to her mind, and she beamed in the knowledge that this magnificent man wanted her. She would be his last vivid moment of bliss and he would be hers. Her fingers dug into his firm buns and she felt his whole body tense in response.

A moan escaped his full mouth. Forsaking the nipple, he plundered the base of her throat with nips and kisses while his strong hand tugged at her scrub pants. She wanted to cling to every inch of him, melt and pour herself inside his skin to remain close to him forever. There, she might finally feel safe.

"Hold me tight," she whispered.

His grip strengthened around her waist, fusing them together in a strong embrace. Rhonda could barely breathe and loved it. She relished the full contact of his body and shuddered at the hardness of his warm member against the skin of her thighs. The heat generated at her core demanded immediate fulfillment.

When his mouth covered hers, she closed her eyes and welcomed the invasion of his impetuous kiss. The lack of oxygen fogged her brain but she welcomed that, too. She didn't want to see or think, only feel. Her body flushed with warmth and nothing remained in her mind but the imperative need to mesh with him and feel him inside her. Their shelter could collapse any minute, and she wanted to experience all of him at least once before they both died.

"I want you now," she whispered in his ear, opening her thighs and straining against him. "We may not have much time."

As if he'd waited for her signal, a floodgate seemed to open, unleashing Cole's wildest instincts. His hands slipped to her hips and held her in a steadfast grip. He wedged one thigh between her legs and crushed her mound. The sensation made Rhonda moan and want to squirm, but she realized his hands pinned her down. She felt deliciously trapped under him, yearning for release.

She gasped when Cole's powerful fingers penetrated deep into her and caressed her inside, exacerbating her need further. She tightened around his robust fingers, seeking a stronger contact. "I want you now," she begged, at the brink of losing control.

She felt the emptiness when his fingers slipped out, but the contact of his body and his powerful penetration maddened her, eliciting a cry of delighted surprise as he filled her completely. Caught under his strong body, she accepted him fully.



Cole took her mouth in a greedy kiss. Each forceful thrust brought forth incredible pleasure and her screams reverberated through both their bodies. His sustained lovemaking brought her to the brink of delirium.

Screaming and moaning like a feline in heat, with no desire to come up for air, Rhonda gladly rode the tidal wave of their passion with the desperation of those who know they will soon die. She drowned herself in the moment, clinging to Cole like to a life raft during a shipwreck.

Finally, when she knew she couldn't take much more of this overwhelming bliss, she felt Cole swell inside her and quicken his tempo. His unrestrained roar as he exploded delighted her, and his quivering release, shook her more deeply than the tremors of the disintegrating planet.

As Rhonda, exhausted, struggled to catch her breath, Cole rolled off her gently and cuddled against her, holding her close. For a few minutes, neither spoke and only their ragged breathing filled the small arched shelter.

"You, too, are full of surprises," she finally uttered between labored breaths.

"Glad you liked it."

"Liked it?" She giggled. "This was the most extraordinary experience of my life. Is it always like that for you?"

"Uh-uh." He nuzzled her neck. "Only with exceptional partners."

"Exceptional?"

He grinned and pressed his new erection against her side. "Very exceptional."

Amazed at his stamina, she hesitated. "Such strain can't be good for your healing wound."

Cole winked. "If we die here in a few hours, kiddo, it won't matter a bit."

"I see your point." Besides, Rhonda hadn't had quite enough of him, yet. "I'll give you a few minutes, then we can make love again," she whispered, knowing this might be their last tryst, the very last pleasure before their lives ended abruptly at the peak of their vitality.

## Chapter Twelve

Cole jumped, shaken out of a blissful slumber, and banged his head against the slope of the arched wall. The ground rocked and metal bars moaned and creaked under the quake's pressure. On the mattress beside him, Rhonda still slept. She looked beautiful in the nude, with her thick auburn curls framing her relaxed face and athletic shoulders.

She awoke with a questioning stare. "What was that noise?"

On each side of their shelter, the infirmary seemed to fold and unfold like a crinkled ball of cardboard. Duracrete panels snapped and collapsed, crashing in a jangle of metal clangs and splintering glass.

"Get dressed." Cole immediately regretted the firmness in his tone. Memories of their desperate joining brought delightful shivers to his body, but he had to overcome the distraction and keep his wits about him. He pointed at a widening vertical fissure high above, to the side of the blocked door. The mound of rubble made it accessible. "We may be able to squeeze out through there. This could be our only chance to avoid getting buried alive." He steadied himself against the arch as the ground shook for a few seconds of aftershock, then he grabbed his uniform from the stack of survival supplies.

Rhonda started to dress as well. "The double walls are breaking down? That's not supposed to happen." Fear lurked in her deep brown eyes.

Cole cinched his belt and snapped on his holster. "It could be our salvation." Somehow, the good news made him uneasy. If they weren't going to die, he wondered how he would cope with their highly irregular relationship. In the heat of the moment, Cole had surrendered to his overwhelming desire, but now he doubted he'd made the right choice. His concern for Rhonda could impair his judgment and complicate things.

As he slipped on his boots, Cole realized how much he hated unorthodox situations among guards. To make things worse, he'd initiated this one. On the positive side, he felt no pain from the surgery, and his body seemed to have mostly recovered.

The clangor of the quake faded, but echoes of voices somehow reverberated inside the infirmary. Checking his compad, Cole saw no red dots to indicate convicts anywhere near the medical ward. He pointed to the high-vaulted ceiling above the door, where many conduits and wide maintenance ducts

gaped open. “The sound must be traveling along those broken pipes from another part of the facility.” Stepping closer to the bottom of the rubble pile, Cole examined the cracked wall. They’d have to climb to reach the fissure. “We can only take what will not slow us down.”

Rhonda enumerated the objects as she made two piles. “Phaser, water canteen, emergency rations.” She paused holding up a floodlight.

Cole remembered how scared she was in the dark tunnel and nodded.

Rhonda seemed greatly relieved as she clipped one on her belt and set one aside for him. “Safety cable?”

“Good thinking.” Cole saw her stuff various medical supplies in her deep cargo pockets but did not comment. The fact that Rhonda followed regulations in such dire circumstances commanded his respect. He suppressed a smile as he tucked his own gear.

Rhonda looked up to him with embarrassment. “I lost my knife on our way here. I noticed you had a spare.”

Decidedly, her intelligent concern for their safety kept surprising Cole. He pulled his straight dagger out of one boot, keeping the yataghan. The curved blade required specialized training Rhonda didn’t have. “Use it well. It saved my life many times.”

Rhonda nodded then sheathed the dagger in her boot.

“Ready?” Cole stepped out of the protected archway and ventured onto the unstable mound of rubble that blocked the door and lay against the fissured wall. Carefully, he found his footing, testing each step.

He glanced back at Rhonda who grabbed onto protruding beams and heaved herself up through the debris with the agility of a professional climber. Once again, Cole couldn’t help but admire her lithe body and had to push away lusty thoughts.

When he stood on the summit of the rubble pile against the cracked wall, Cole reached for a handhold along the fracture line of the vertical fissure. Something clanged above them and he looked up. “Watch out!” Shoving Rhonda against the wall, Cole flattened himself upon her to shield her body.

The large module fell from the ceiling and crashed on the top of the pile, less than half a meter away. A clicking robot, whose circuits sparked and smoked, still clung to the module. Apparently, a ruptured maintenance duct on the ceiling had dumped its mechanical occupant.

Cole exhaled the breath he’d been holding. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” Rhonda still held on to him.

Cole relished the contact of her warm body, but he pulled away. He suddenly realized Rhonda

hadn't talked much since their indiscretion. A highly unusual thing for the Rhonda Alendresis he knew. Was she having second thoughts about last night as well?

Facing the wall, he found a solid foothold, pushed out, and cautiously climbed toward the wider part of the fissure. As he reached it, his hope vanished. The breach only affected the inside wall. The double wall on the outside remained intact. They were still trapped!

As Cole wondered how to tell Rhonda about this disheartening discovery, a loud bang on the door pierced the stillness. Cole dropped down next to Rhonda and turned on his compad but it showed no one there. In a loud thump, an upper section of the door panel caved inward then fell inside the infirmary.

Loud voices cheered. They came from behind the door. The thick metal chunk tumbled down the pile of debris to crash on the floor below. How could anyone have pierced the half-buried security door? It would require heavy equipment. Hope grew as Cole wondered whether some kind of civilian help might have come to rescue them.

"Friend or foe?" Rhonda dropped and crouched behind the large fallen module that had almost smashed them. Obviously, she had the same thought.

Cole hid as well and watched the door intently. From his vantage point above and to the side, he observed with growing dismay as Tomar himself crawled through the narrow opening and emerged from a wide gap between two metal beams. Wasn't Tomar dead? Killed by Rhonda?

The Monack sniffed around. "They are here. This whole place reeks of them. Find them."

Seven or eight convicts followed the Monack inside the infirmary. Cole checked his compad, and only confirmed that none of the inmates inside the infirmary registered on the pad. Somehow, they had disabled or removed their locator chips. Damn Tomar's cleverness!

Cole glanced questioningly at Rhonda but brought one finger across his lips. She looked baffled and shrugged, seemingly horrified. With Tomar alive, their hopes of ever escaping pursuit quickly vanished. The shape-shifter would never give up.

Tomar and his gang disappeared into the supply room, where they rattled shelves and cleared debris in their frantic search for the guards.

Cole pulled out his phaser, set it on kill then motioned Rhonda to follow him. As quietly as he could, he descended the side of the rubble heap. When his foot broke some glass, he stopped, waiting for a reaction from Tomar's gang, but they didn't seem to have heard it among all the noise they created.

As he reached the opening in the door, Cole peered through the gap. Two Juzzaar, probably too big to squeeze through the hole, stood guard outside. Fortunately, they kept their bleeding backs to the

door. Cole signaled with two fingers to Rhonda. She nodded and pulled out her phaser.

The correct timing would decide Cole's success or failure. If he acted too slow, the gang inside the infirmary would rush out and overcome him and Rhonda. Silently, Cole slid outside the door feet first.

He stood up just as the two Juzzaar reacted to his sudden appearance. One rushed him and Cole fired his phaser. The Juzzaar fell, but his comrade yelled and charged.

Rhonda's phaser fire through the opening stopped the Juzzaar's attack and strangled his battle cry. As she emerged from the hole in the door, Cole helped her out. Then he delivered another lethal charge to each fallen Juzzaar.

"Quick," Rhonda whispered as she found her feet. "Tomar is coming."

Setting his phaser on burst, Cole stepped back and aimed at the high ceiling above the door. He fired as the first convict struggled through the narrow hole. The explosion brought down several tons of duracrete and conduits and buried the unfortunate bastard, along with the two dead Juzzaar and the infirmary door, under a heaping mound of debris.

A feeling of triumph gave Cole new strength as he motioned to Rhonda, and they started along the corridor in search of a viable exit. Even the heat of the main floor didn't dampen his optimism. But he must control his emotions to keep a clear head.

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As she jogged alongside Cole through the yellow corridors, Rhonda felt relieved. She hoped Tomar would remain buried and would give them no more concern. But free of this burden, elated by her imminent freedom, she now wondered what Cole thought of their romantic interlude. He'd not mentioned it once, or said a tender word to her since they'd awoken. Was he too embarrassed to talk about it? He couldn't possibly have forgotten. She, on the other hand, would never forget. "About last night..."

"Don't worry. I won't tell anyone." His cold tone barred any further comment.

But Rhonda needed to talk. "I mean, if we make it out of here..."

"If we get out, there'll be time for talk later. Let's forget about it and deal with our immediate problem."

"Forget about it?" Rhonda didn't appreciate being shut down. "So if we die down here today, we'll never know how we feel about each other?"

“What’s the point? Right now, unless we get out, I don’t see any future of any kind for us. Do you?” He hurried his pace.

Rhonda had no answer for such cynicism. Didn’t he think he deserved a shot at happiness? Had the man abandoned all hope of survival? Rhonda certainly hadn’t. As she matched his stride, she banished any romantic thoughts and tried to envision the most effective way to reach the Garrison.

Cole paused at a T-intersection along the outside wall and consulted his compad.

Rhonda scanned the thin fissures crisscrossing the wall. “Where are these conduits you mentioned earlier? You said the inmates might use them to escape if the walls were breached?” She saw no telltales of such vertical shafts in the crumbling wall.

“They are not in the outer walls.” Cole sounded impatient, as if the question bothered him. He turned right into the corridor.

Rhonda increased her speed to keep up with him. “Then where are they?”

“In the square pillars supporting the ceiling.”

“Couldn’t we blast a hole in one of them and climb inside the shaft to get back to the Garrison faster?” Rhonda couldn’t believe she’d just suggested the scariest route of all, another dark and narrow space where she might freak out. But if she wanted to survive, she would have to overcome her worst phobia.

He flashed her an impatient look. “These columns are reinforced with titanium.”

“It might take some effort, but it would be quicker than finding and unlocking each set of stairs as we go. We don’t know if the other guards have found a way off this planet, but if they did and they think we are dead, they won’t wait for us.”

“Even if we could breach one of these pillars, thousands of convicts could follow us to the upper levels. It would compromise the safety of the whole Garrison.” Cole shook his head. “I can’t do that.”

Rhonda couldn’t believe his refusal. “You would consider sacrificing both of us just to make sure no prisoner reaches the Garrison? What if the Garrison is already compromised?”

“We cannot think that way.” The obstinate man seemed more concerned about containing his precious prisoners than about his own survival.

“Why not? It’s a possibility, isn’t it?” After the night they had shared, more than ever, Rhonda wanted them both to live. She wanted a future with Cole.

Obviously, in that ideal future, they’d never be able to work together as they never agreed on the same methods. But last night, Rhonda had glimpsed another Cole, a gentle and tender Cole, and she couldn’t get him out of her mind.

In the right environment, Rhonda felt their relationship would stand a chance to blossom. But for that to happen, she had to change his mind about playing hero. True heroes rarely lived to tell their story and she needed him alive.

Although they kept clear of the other convicts and couldn't see them, the sounds of many voices bounced on the walls and echoed on the high ceilings. Several times, Cole changed direction and backtracked along the yellow corridors of Level Sixteen. The temperature kept rising and Rhonda loosened her collar. Soon, avoiding encounters with inmates in their flight through the more crowded blocks became close to impossible.

Cole stopped and leaned back against the wall while consulting his compad. "We have to take another route. This one up ahead is too congested." He wiped a glistening brow. "This is not working out." He sounded discouraged. "There are too many of them."

"This is no time to give up, Captain." Rhonda hoped reminding him of his title would boost his pride and give him strength. "Any chest pain?"

"I'm fine." He hesitated. "Tired, but fine."

He did look tired, and Rhonda wondered whether the exploits of the past night had weakened him. But it should have done wonders for his spirits. She dug into her cargo pocket and pulled out a shiny package of energy pills. She handed four to Cole. "Take these, they'll make you feel invincible."

"I don't take drugs."

"Doctor's order." Rhonda shoved the pills into his hand. "It's not drugs, it's vitamins. The medications from the surgery are wearing off. In your condition you have to take the pills or you won't have enough strength to go on."

"Strength won't help us against thousands." Although true, his pessimistic comment probably came from simple exhaustion.

Rhonda smiled. "I've got an idea."

"By all means, pray tell." His mocking tone clearly indicated he didn't believe her.

But Rhonda wouldn't let him keep her down. "If you can't fight them, join them."

"What?" He stared at her as if she'd gone insane.

"There are enough dead prisoners around to find overalls that will fit us. Dressed like them, we could blend in, pass for inmates. We just have to behave like them when we cross the populated areas."

Cole frowned. "Rhonda, you are a genius. You keep amazing me." He popped the four energy pills.

"I bet the guard's manual doesn't mention energy pills or playing inmate." She laughed.

“Straight-laced Cole Riggeur in convict overalls... Wait until the other guards hear about it.”

Cole grimaced. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t spread the word.”

“Not a chance.” Rhonda secretly enjoyed his discomfort. Hope made her cheery and mischievous. “But don’t worry. If we survive, you won’t care about being the butt of their jokes.”

Rhonda’s idea pointed their search in a different direction. Through the compad scanner they now sought motionless prisoners in isolated areas, in hopes they would be dead. The sudden realization that they could still get out of this mess alive made Rhonda’s morale soar, and under the influence of the fast-acting energy pills, Cole grew quite congenial.

Their first search led them to a sick prisoner lying on his bunk. The poor man shook with fever and looked in such a moribund state that Rhonda didn’t have the heart to deprive him of his clothes. He seemed too far gone to benefit from any of Rhonda’s medicines. Not that she could spare any.

She shook her head at Cole. “His disease could be contagious. We can’t risk it.”

Cole nodded and consulted his compad. They quickly left the area in search of their next candidate.

Their second find almost made Rhonda heave. The bloody cadaver already in an advanced stage of decomposition stunk up the whole cell. His ripped yellow overalls showed large dark stains where he’d been stabbed. The stench of decay permeated the clothes and the many bloody holes would attract attention. It would simply not do.

On the third try, the scanner detected a group of five motionless prisoners. They could have been asleep, so Cole and Rhonda proceeded cautiously. When they came upon the group gathered in the same cell, the prisoners didn’t move. Their awkward positions, however, left no doubt about the fact that they no longer lived. Entering the cell, Rhonda didn’t have to take their pulse. They were dead and cold. She could tell most of them died from a blow to the head, others from a broken neck.

Cole examined one of the men. “This one looks clean.”

“Very little blood, only lightly soiled.” Rhonda rejoiced as she realized that they’d found the right bodies for her plan. “Their clothes are perfect.”

Cole immediately chose a dead inmate about his size and pulled the front zipper down then peeled off the overalls by pulling the bottom of the pant legs. Rhonda picked a heavier body, figuring his clothes would give her ample room to hide her womanly curves. She had seen first hand what male convicts did to women prisoners and didn’t want to risk it.

Watching Cole slipping the overalls on top of his grays despite the rising temperature, she decided to do the same. She didn’t feel ready to give up the protection of the guard’s Kevlar-microfiber



uniform. The light armor might come handy in a fight.

“I can still see some gray.” Cole pointed at her soft boots sticking out of the pants.

Although they could betray Rhonda as a guard, she didn’t want to sacrifice her running advantage. “Good footgear could save our lives.” She rubbed the clean leather into a reeking pile of wet garbage heaped in a corner of the cell. The thought that it might include excrement nauseated her and she resisted the urge to heave.

Cole hesitated but followed her example. “Hide your hair.” He snatched a cap off one of the prisoners and tossed it to Rhonda. “A female prisoner would attract too much attention.”

Catching the hat, Rhonda felt grateful for Cole’s protective instincts. She bunched up her thick mane and stuffed it inside the cap. “How’s that?”

Cole smiled. “Yellow is definitely your color.” He looked like a boy scout, even in wolf’s clothing.

Rhonda shivered at the idea that she probably wore the clothes of a serial killer who’d suffered a violent death. Some said thoughts and feelings clung to a person’s clothes. She hoped she wouldn’t pick up any nasty vibrations.

She checked Cole’s attire. “You don’t look like a prisoner. Try to stoop a little.”

Cole dropped his shoulders. “Like that?”

“You are too neat.” Rhonda went up to him and messed his hair. Despite the shadow on his jaw, he still looked clean. She gathered some rubble dust and rubbed it on his face then she did the same to herself. “Better?”

“One more thing.” Cole ripped two stripes of yellow cloth from another body and handed one to Rhonda. “Got to hide the chip implants on our necks, too.”

Rhonda wrapped the yellow strip around her throat. It could pass for a gang recognition sign. She transferred her phaser to the deepest pocket of the overalls.

Cole consulted his compad then stored the small device in his breast pocket. “Got the route memorized. Let’s go.”

Strolling without haste, as if they had nowhere to go and nothing to do, Cole and Rhonda started toward the populated part of the Yellow Level.

The prisoners paid them no heed too busy looking out for themselves. Their state had changed since last time Rhonda had seen them up close. The Styx withdrawal madness had peaked and faded. They now seemed organized around various leaders. The weak obeyed the strong, hoping for a better chance of surviving the ordeal.

Rhonda understood why the inmates gathered in this area when she realized that a number of cells still had working water and food dispensers. Each of the functioning cells seemed to be guarded by a different gang. The lowest ranking in the gangs carried water and food to their various groups in makeshift containers made of broken tubing and metal sinks pried from the duracrete walls. A semblance of community life had taken form to insure the survival of the group.

Head down, resisting the urge to run away from this horrible place, Rhonda tried to walk like a convict, avoiding eye contact, hoping no one would notice her feminine shape.

Just after they'd had passed the last cluster, Rhonda's implant buzzed in her ear. Heart pumping, wondering whether or not anyone heard the communicator, Rhonda hastened her steps.

## Chapter Thirteen

### Level Sixteen - Yellow Zone

As he hurried away from the hub where the convicts gathered, Cole expected a voice to come out of his implant but no message came. Once out of sight and earshot, he tapped the device on his neck. “Cole Riggeur here. Anyone listening? Respond!”

Rhonda, who must have heard the buzz in her ear as well, stared at him. “Someone is trying to contact us. Maybe they found a space worthy vehicle.”

“If they did, I hope we didn’t blow our chance of letting them know we are still alive.” Consulting his compad, Cole hurried toward the closest stairwell.

When they reached it, he checked his compad to make sure no convicts lurked nearby and applied his hand to the right scanner. Rhonda did the same on the left. Cole entered his personal code, reactivating the disabled door. It opened and they quickly entered the stairwell. Cole locked then disabled the door from inside the stairwell and started up the metallic steps. Until they reached the next level, he and Rhonda were safe from convict attacks.

“Do you think the prisoners will be loose on the next level up?” Rhonda sounded more worried than he’d ever seen her.

“I hope not.” Cole experienced apprehension as well but he tried the optimistic approach. “They weren’t last time we passed through.”

“That was on our way down. A lot has happened since then.”

“You have a hyperactive mind, Rhonda. Let’s stick to the facts until we find out.” But Cole suspected she might be right. He feared they would encounter loose prisoners on the next level up.

Why did he have to antagonize Rhonda? He’d screwed up last night, but the last thing he wanted was to punish her for it. She was intelligent and beautiful and had done nothing wrong. Why did he keep reacting to her as if she pushed his buttons? Did he care for her more than he knew?

Their steps echoed in the narrow stairwell as he and Rhonda progressed up the six flights of stairs. The lights had dimmed since the last time they’d used stairs, and the poor lighting made the bright yellow on the walls look dirty. Cole wondered how long the emergency power would last. If the

power failed completely, they would be doomed.

Rhonda sighed. As he feared, she couldn't remain silent too long. "If they are loose, we are going to stand out in yellow overalls among green-clad inmates."

Cole hid his frustration at her insistence. "It might work in our favor, kiddo. They'll think we are fierce and mean, and they'll respect us."

Rhonda frowned but did not reply.

The wall color gradually changed from yellow to apple green, then they reached the door and went through the routine of unlocking it. Cole felt Rhonda looking over his shoulder as he consulted the compad. How could she smell so good? The floor plan showed thousands of red dots roaming the corridors on the other side of the door.

"Apparently you were right again." It bothered Cole to be wrong, mainly in front of Rhonda. "They are loose here, too." He waited until no red dot stood in direct view of the door, then he pushed it open and they emerged on the Green Level.

#### Level Fifteen - Green Zone

Rhonda barely recognized the green level. In art classes, she'd learned that green was a peaceful color, but the surrounding noise told of great turmoil. Yells and cheers came from many directions. Sounds of demolition emanated from the center of the main floor. Nearby, a large pile of rubble formed a mound as high as the top of the cell walls. The odors, however didn't overwhelm her, and the stench of blood seemed eerily absent. Rhonda took that as a good sign.

Cole started to climb the large heap of debris. "From up there we'll have a better view of the whole floor."

Rhonda followed him up. Indeed, from their vantage point, they could see over the cell walls, as if looking down at a rat maze in a lab, except that the cells had bars on the top. The prisoners seemed calmer than on the lower levels. Some slept, others went about leading some semblance of life. Many worked at clearing up debris and stacking it up in different places, effectively reconfiguring the layout of the ward.

The damages seemed more extensive at this level than below. Toward the center of the main floor, many corridors seemed erased, as the walls of the maze had collapsed. Twisted prison bars were strewn throughout the whole area. A great number of inmates had gathered in the field of debris, and most of them looked up to the ceiling.

Following their gaze, Rhonda saw a wide gaping hole up above, its edges spiked with broken pipes and modules. The opening allowed communication with Level Fourteen. She understood what had caused the damage. Black burn marks told of an explosion. She imagined a pocket of methane in a sewer pipe had met with an electric spark.

Through the opening, green and aqua-clad prisoners swayed on makeshift ropes as they climbed up or down the fifteen-meter height. On closer inspection, the ropes seemed constructed of blankets and overalls tied together. Level Fourteen just above, the Aqua Zone, looked in equal disrepair.

Eyes on his compad, Cole pursed his lips. "This is going to be a fun trip," he said dryly. "There are inmates loitering in front of most of the stairwell doors. No way we can get anywhere near the stairs without attracting a lot of attention."

But Rhonda saw an opportunity. "Do you think they would let us use our cable to climb through the ceiling? After all, we are supposed to look like inmates."

Cole hesitated, obviously bothered by the idea. "You don't know these guys. They'll ask where we got the cable, and they'll try to take it from us."

Rhonda scoffed. "Look who's pessimistic now? I know it's not textbook behavior, but we want to get up as fast as we can, right? And we don't want them to suspect I'm a woman, so, you'll have to do the talking."

Cole shook his head. "This is highly irregular."

"We must get out of here fast, even if it implies bargaining with the prisoners. Besides, we have a few other things to barter with than the cable."

"Like what?"

Rhonda padded her pockets. "Medical supplies, comfortable boots, water, rations. Should I go on?"

"No. You made your point." He sighed. "But it could get ugly if they figure out what we really are."

Rhonda had no answer for that.

The struggling breath of a man climbing the rubble pile behind them made her turn. Too late to avert her face, the man had already seen her, so she remained facing him and tried to look mean and masculine.

The approaching stranger, human and overweight, wore green overalls. "How did you get here from Level Sixteen?" He spoke in a raucous voice but the tone sounded jovial enough. "Is there an open passage to go down?"

“What’s it to you?” Cole answered in a gruff tone. “The exit is up, not down.”

The fat man smiled. “Depends on what’s down there. Do they have food?” From the looks of him he didn’t starve.

“Believe me, you don’t want to go there.” Cole glanced around the immediate vicinity and lowered his voice. “Will your friends let us climb up to the Aqua level?”

Rhonda refrained from smiling. Cole had finally seen the advantages of her idea.

The man laughed and his belly shook. “Wait your turn, pal. There’s a long line and only three ropes.”

“What if I had my own rope?” Cole asked, matter-of- fact.

The man’s smile widened. “In that case, I can put in a word for you. What’s in it for me? Got anything to eat beside the usual slop?”

As Cole didn’t respond fast enough, Rhonda jammed her elbow in his arm.

Cole caught his breath and cleared his voice. “I’m sure we can find something you’ll like. Where is your leader?”

As the man didn’t move, Rhonda took two fruit bars from her pocket and handed them to the man.

The portly inmate snatched the bars and smiled as he stuffed them inside his green overalls then picked his way down the mound. “Follow me.”

While Cole swaggered beside the man, Rhonda followed head down.

Sticking his thumb back toward Rhonda, the man whispered, “What’s the matter with him? Is he your bitch?”

Cole glanced at Rhonda over his shoulder, obviously worried, then he resumed his swagger and shrugged. “Yeah. He’s mute. A long story. Just show us the way.”

Unsure how she felt about the disparaging term, Rhonda bit her lips to remain silent. This was no time to share her opinion, and she’d never realized how much she enjoyed talking and expressing herself.

The man walked surprisingly fast for his heavy frame. He led them through corridor after corridor. Rhonda followed, amazed at how quickly the convicts had organized themselves.

They seemed to have figured out the lay of the floor. Graffiti on the walls, some very artistic, indicated various gangs’ territories. Arrows and creative graphics pointed the way to the important areas to find food, water and other useful places. One particular drawing could only indicate a brothel, marked by a smiling phallus in the shape of an arrow. Rhonda shuddered and kept walking, head down.

Other inmates stared at the yellow overalls with curiosity as they walked by, but none dared speak to the newcomers. Their guide also seemed to impose respect, and Rhonda wondered at his rank in this new society. Who exactly was the jolly fat man?

Soon, they reached the destroyed area beneath the jagged oval hole in the ceiling. In the center of the disaster zone blackened by the explosion, a bulky Juzzaar with golden skin and dark glasses collected bribes and directed the many prisoners waiting to climb the ropes.

Rhonda took it as a good sign. Juzzaars were big but not as vicious as Monacks or dominant Karatzins. There didn't seem to be any shape-shifters on this floor of lesser criminals, and Rhonda felt better about suggesting cooperation.

As they closed the distance separating them from the leader, Rhonda kept a subdued attitude. No matter how unsavory, she had to play the part of Cole's male bitch. She stooped slightly.

The fat man now fawned around the Juzzaar. "Master, I have brought you strangers who say they have supplies we want." Evidently, the portly man served as the Juzzaar's main supplier.

Cole much shorter than the Juzzaar, looked like a peacock standing up to a bull. "It's not free. We want something in exchange."

"And what is that?" The Juzzaar's golden face remained impassible and Rhonda couldn't tell anything from his eyes, masked by the dark glasses.

Taking two confident steps, Cole accosted the leader. "I want to get up there now. I have my own cable."

As the Juzzaar sized up Cole, the impassible face twitched with a glint of interest. "A real cable? With pulleys and mechanism? Strong enough to carry great weight?" As if he'd said too much, the Juzzaar turned away and watched the men climbing the ropes. "What else do you have?" he asked in a more detached tone, not even looking at Cole.

"Depends." Cole scratched his jaw as if thinking hard. "What do you need?"

A greedy smile lit the Juzzaar's face. "Weapons?"

Cole laughed and shook his head. "Ask me for something else."

"If you don't have any weapons, what prevents me from killing you right here and now and take whatever you have?" The Juzzaar was a tough bargainer.

"I didn't say I didn't have weapons. I said they're not for sale." Cole offered a disdainful smile. "Besides, jumping me wouldn't give you much. My most valuable merchandise is not all on me."

"So what have you got? Guns? Knives?" The Juzzaar looked confused.

"Possibly, but I said they're not for sale."

The Juzzaar approached Cole menacingly. “I don’t believe you have weapons.”

“Find out at your own risk.” Cole’s arrogant attitude surprised Rhonda. He played a dangerous game and she didn’t like it.

“You’re bluffing.” Despite the conviction in his words, the Juzzaar didn’t make any aggressive move.

“Am I?” Cole glanced around and his gaze stopped on Rhonda, as if to let her know he had full control of the situation.

But the Juzzaar also stared at Rhonda. “My price is your pretty boy. He has nice pale skin. I like pale skin.”

Rhonda bit her lips. This would complicate matters. She glared at the Juzzaar in hopes of discouraging him.

The gang leader chuckled in response.

Cole interposed himself between Rhonda and the Juzzaar. “The boy’s not for trade. Anything else you want?”

“Nah. It’s him or nothing.” The Juzzaar waved Cole away, gesturing with vehemence. “Get out of here before I tell my men to get rid of you.”

At the edge of his flying sleeve, just above the wrist, Rhonda noticed an ugly wound on the Juzzaar’s forearm, already purple with a bad infection. She wanted to attract Cole’s attention to it but dared not speak. So she approached the Juzzaar in a submissive manner and gently took his hand.

The leader looked at her with delighted surprise but didn’t take his hand away.

Rhonda shuddered at the thought that he may have taken her gesture for a sexual advance. She pulled up his green sleeve to uncover a thick pale arm. The Juzzaar flinched when she probed the angry wound that already festered and smelled of putrefaction.

Reaching inside the cargo pocket of her yellow overalls, Rhonda pulled out an emergency pack, tore the package with her teeth, then pressed it against the wound and affixed it with surgical tape.

Bemused, the Juzzaar stared at his bandaged arm and smiled. “You are kind.”

Rhonda pulled out two more emergency packs, pressed them into the Juzzaar’s hand then bowed and regained her place behind Cole.

Cole smiled to the leader. “Now you know why he’s not for trade. How about we leave the cable behind, and you can use it to lift up the heavier men in your group.”

Rhonda appreciated Cole’s diplomacy. He didn’t mention the Juzzaar’s bulk or his weight too great for the makeshift ropes. On the contrary, he’d made the leader look as if he cared for the well



being of the less fit members of his gang. A muffled cheer emanated from their guide, answered by that of several other convicts.

The Juzzaar tried to look stern, but Rhonda could see the hint of a repressed smile on his pale golden face. She could tell he felt happy and grateful. She imagined his wound must have been extremely painful, and she knew the pack had numbed the wound instantly on contact. From the leader's perspective, she'd just saved him from an excruciating death by gangrene. If he only knew what was in store for him and all the inmates of Zurin Five...

The Juzzaar didn't glance at Cole but ordered his men gruffly. "Let them throw their cable."

Rhonda rejoiced at her small victory. Compassion had won where threats had failed.

Cole pulled out the bundle of thin cable from inside his yellow overalls and aimed the tiny crossbow at a protruding block of duracrete spiked with many metal beams, high above the hole. The arrow sung through the air and pierced the cement with a metallic clang.

Cole pulled on the cable to test the anchor and check that the pulley actually functioned. He affixed the ascender handle mechanism to the cable then signaled Rhonda to go first.

She grabbed the handle and pushed the up button. She hoped she could cope with the convicts on the upper level without much trouble, as they should be less violent. The cable lifted her effortlessly above the crowd of onlookers, much faster than the inmates could climb on their knotted ropes.

This mode of climbing would certainly speed up the prisoners' migration and help those who didn't have the necessary fitness to climb. Technically, it would be a mistake to leave the cable behind, but Rhonda hoped Cole would keep his word to these derelicts. She'd feel disappointed if he didn't.

As she rose above the circle of inmates, all the turned-up faces looked hopeful. They didn't know they might all meet a horrible death in a few days or so. She wondered how much time was left before the planet exploded. Days? Hours? In any case, Rhonda couldn't stand looking at these people. She glanced up where other inmates waited for her.

When she reached the Aqua Level, she swung toward the edge and grabbing hands helped her find her footing. Her pant leg caught against a sharp edge and she heard it rip. She didn't look down, for fear of bringing attention to the tear. But she feared her gray uniform or boot might show through the rent. *Dear God, please let no one notice!*

One aqua-clad inmate snatched the handle from her, unlocked the brake, and slid full speed down to the floor below with a hoot, to the cheers of his comrades.

Rhonda counted the seconds as she watched Cole take hold of the ascender handle. He came up slowly and must have seen the urgency on Rhonda's face, because he increased the speed on the dial.

Or could he see her guard uniform showing?

All eyes, including Rhonda's, focused on him as he swung and landed on the edge of the hole. Cole saluted the Juzzaar below with a wave of the hand then took Rhonda's arm and hurried away from the group gathered around the opening to help the climbers.

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#### Level Fourteen - Aqua Zone

Rhonda felt Cole's hand digging into her elbow as he hastened her along the corridors. Once they were out of sight in the maze, she followed him into an empty cell.

"You've got to fix that pant leg. I can see your grays." He looked angry, or maybe worried? Did he really care about her? Since their flight from the infirmary he'd become unreadable, giving her no clue as to how he felt.

Rhonda sat on the bunk and examined the ripped pant leg. She couldn't help wonder whether or not Cole had real feeling for her. "I didn't bring a sewing kit," she said in exasperation assessing the damage. What could she do? Suddenly she remembered her other supplies and fished inside her pants pockets. She came up with surgical tape. "This might work."

"I'll watch for unwanted visitors." Cole fished out his compad and turned it on. "We're clear, but I'll stay in the corridor and watch, just in case..." He didn't finish the sentence but Rhonda remembered that Tomar's men had ditched their locator chips and would not register on the compad.

Feeling safer with Cole watching, Rhonda turned up the bottom of the yellow pants and patched the tear from the inside with tape. She made a terrible job of it, but at least the repair would hold and hide the gray uniform underneath.

Just as Rhonda stepped off the bunk, her comimplant buzzed again. She tapped it and stared at Cole who tapped his implant as well.

The feminine voice at the other end came as a great comfort. "This is Garrison guard Nya. For those of you guards out there listening, we have good news. We found a ship..."

## Chapter Fourteen

### Infirmery of Level Sixteen - Yellow Zone

Frustrated at being trapped in the damaged bunker-like infirmery, Tomar had already killed two of his men for shooting medical Styx, when a faint sound from the intercom unit caught his attention. “Silence!”

The three remaining members of his gang immediately stopped foraging among the supplies and waited.

The crackling of the intercom didn’t provide a clear sound, but a woman’s voice seemed to have established contact. Tomar pushed a button and the sound amplified.

“...not a shuttle, not a Duran vessel... A mercenary ship. It’s been parked illegally on a hidden landing platform for quite some time. The coordinates are forty by sixteen in the Beta sector... Get there as fast as you can. There is enough room for the whole Garrison and more. But watch your backs. If the mercenaries are still in the vicinity, they won’t like us borrowing their vessel.” The message drowned off in a flurry of interference.

“A ship?” Tomar had figured out the earthquake situation to be serious, but why were the guards in such a hurry to leave the planet? Was Zurin Five in critical danger?

“What does it mean, Boss?”

“The vermin jump ship only when it’s sinking.” Anger churned inside Tomar’s every cell. “I bet you this stinking planet is going to blow, and soon.”

“Are we going to die, Boss?”

“Not if I can help it.” Tomar lied. He couldn’t care less about his men, but he sure wouldn’t let the guards leave him to die on this forsaken rock. “If they believe they can get rid of me so easily, they are mistaken.”

“But we are trapped here.”

“Maybe *you* are.” Tomar had to hurry. “Is there any small hole, even a pinhole in the wall that separates us from the main floor?”

The three convicts shook their heads disgustedly.

“Then let’s make one.” The stupid humans didn’t understand his plan, but Tomar could pour himself through a small hole. He would gladly leave the morons behind. There were enough desperate inmates on the main floor to provide him with a suitable gang to fight his way out and steal that mercenary ship.

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#### Level Fourteen - Aqua Zone

“They found a real ship?” Rhonda whispered. Filled with new hope, she suppressed a hoot of joy and had to control herself not to jump up and down on the cell floor. She didn’t want to attract attention. Any sound echoed on the high ceiling and could travel far.

Cole’s square jaw suddenly tensed. He tapped his implant. “This is Riggeur,” he said in an earnest whisper. “Can you hear me? Nya?”

In Rhonda’s implant, static drowned all possible communication.

Glancing at Rhonda, Cole shook his head. “Nya? If you hear me, wait for us. Rhonda and I are on our way. Still on Level Fourteen but alive and well.” Cole dropped his shoulders and sighed, “It’s no use.”

The flicker of hope dimmed somewhat in Rhonda’s mind. “If they don’t know we are still alive, they won’t wait for us.” But she refused to give in to despair. She would not die trapped in this sinister place. “We’d better hurry, or we’ll be left behind.” She straightened her pant leg, making sure her uniform didn’t show anymore.

“Right again, kiddo.” Cole checked his compad and broke into a fast run.

Rhonda followed him into the corridor. “Still avoiding the convicts?” she asked between breaths. “Even with our disguise?”

“I don’t trust them.” Cole kept running, eyes on his pad.

“Can’t blame you there.” Neither did she. “But running might attract attention.”

Cole slowed to a walk, eyes riveted on the compad. “A dozen inmates coming up from the next corridor on our right.”

Walking beside Cole, Rhonda kept her head down, praying the encounter would prove short and uneventful. A group of aqua-clad inmates emerged ten meters ahead.

“The yellows!” shouted one of the convicts, referring to Cole and Rhonda’s overalls.

“Get them!” said a big burly inmate with badly soiled clothes, brandishing a length of pipe.

Rhonda blanched and pulled out her phaser.

“Watch out, they have guns!” yelled a scrawny convict who sounded like a woman.

“Told you they were guards!”

“Run!” Cole shot the big burly man then retreated the way they’d come.

Setting her phaser on explode, Rhonda aimed and fired in front of the group closing on them, then she ran after Cole.

The explosion reverberated in the lofty heights and carried down the walls. But it couldn’t be the explosion rattling the bars of the cells. Another quake rumbled and rolled.

Ignoring the ground moving under her feet and the pipes and debris tumbling from the ceiling, Rhonda ran after Cole. She tripped and fell and struggled to get back up. The floor still moved but she found some balance. Although she couldn’t run, she staggered, leaning on the walls to steady herself, holding on to bars, she kept moving in the direction Cole had gone.

As the quake subsided, she started to run again. Now she could see Cole not too far ahead. He didn’t look at his compad anymore but took one turn after another and Rhonda slowly gained on him. Did Cole know where he was going? It didn’t matter. Glancing over her shoulder, Rhonda could see no sign of their pursuers, only empty corridors behind them. No sound of pursuit either.

Cole stopped behind a broad square pillar and waited for Rhonda. He breathed heavily and clutched his side. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah. That was close.” Rhonda felt grateful for his concern, but she wondered how long the energy pills would keep him going. “How about you?”

He smiled, more of a grimace. “I’ll be fine.”

“I never thought I’d welcome an earthquake.”

Cole consulted his compad. “The red dots have not moved. They’re still where we left them. Probably out of commission, buried in debris, or confused as to where we went.”

“Which way are the closest stairs now?”

A strong aftershock shoved Rhonda into Cole’s arms against the pillar, and for a second she enjoyed his contact. But the hollow pillar twisted and gave way under them. A wide breach opened at knee level. Rhonda stared down with alarm into a gaping maintenance shaft. Off balance, Cole and Rhonda, lurched at the edge of the dark well.

Rhonda screamed as she felt herself fall inside the shaft, as if attracted by the void. But two strong hands gripped her arm. She now dangled above the dark depths. Grateful for Cole’s quick

reflexes, Rhonda thanked the powers that be.

“Shit!” Cole’s expression changed from concern to incredulity.

With horror, Rhonda realized that in his desperate attempt to save her, Cole had dropped the compad. Looking down the black well, she followed the small device that bounced on a jumble of wires and pipes then plummeted to the black depths of the maintenance shaft. Please, God, no! Not the compad! They’d just lost their advantage of detection over the prisoners. Now what?

“Give me your other hand,” Cole ordered, the raw intensity on his face showing how much he wanted to save her.

Her hand felt slimy as Rhonda reached for his. Cold sweat dripped down her spine. Releasing one hand from her arm, Cole snatched her other wrist. He lifted her slowly toward the brink of the broken wall. The metal plates inside the duracrete had snapped, revealing a shiny sharp edge sandwiched between two thicknesses of concrete.

Clasping her weapon belt through the yellow cloth of the overalls, Cole hefted Rhonda over the edge and deposited her on the floor. “You all right, kiddo?”

Barely able to stand from shaking, Rhonda shuddered with the knowledge that she could have fallen to her death. Warm tears drowned her eyes and blurred her vision. She wasn’t sure whether she cried from fear, frustration, or the grateful realization that Cole had just saved her life.

“Thanks,” she whispered in a shaky voice, but words couldn’t convey her gratitude. Throwing herself into his arms, she kissed him impulsively.

Although he responded with the same fire at first, Cole quickly regained his previous reserve and pushed her gently away from him with an embarrassed smile. “This is not the time, or the place.”

The rejection stung Rhonda’s frayed nerves and she snapped. “If we die in a few hours, I’d rather have kissed you than not!”

“Don’t turn hysterical on me now.” He circled the broken pillar that enveloped the maintenance shaft. “We have more pressing problems.”

He was right, of course, and Rhonda hated to feel guilty. The hollow column hadn’t collapsed. It had snapped close to the base and shifted, but still stood, tilted, resting halfway over the brink of the open well.

Cole crouched, slid underneath the low overhang of the severed shaft, and turned on his flood light to peer up. He came back with a determined set of his jaw. “It seems to go straight up. We’ve got to climb inside.”

“Oh, now you want to use my first idea.” Rhonda felt cheated but struggled to lower her voice.

“It wasn’t good enough before! No, we had to take the stairs!” Cole had managed to steal her idea and make it look as if it were his all along.

He shrugged. “Since some convicts just found out we are guards, and we can’t avoid them without the compad, we have no other choice.”

True. They had to go up that square shaft. Rhonda repressed a shiver at the idea of climbing inside the dark chimney. “Well, the cable would’ve come in handy right now.”

“Not my choice, kiddo. We’ll just have to climb the hard way.”

“What if there is a quake while we are inside?” She immediately regretted bringing up the thought.

“I’m afraid it’s a chance we’ll have to take.”

The irrational fear rushing through Rhonda’s mind wasn’t of earthquakes, however, but of the dark confined space of the maintenance shaft. Of course, they could fall, but going a hundred meters straight up a sealed chimney with no idea how they would carve their way out at the top, that scared her a lot more.

“Let’s get rid of the yellows.” Cole zipped down the cumbersome garment, emptied the pockets and restocked his gray uniform pockets.

Rhonda did the same. “We can’t leave the yellows here for them to find, or they’ll know which way we went and they’ll follow us for sure.”

“I did think of that.” Cole took the prison overalls from her hands, stepped to the edge of the broken pillar then dropped both garments into the gaping shaft. Down the overalls went, billowing and flapping with increasing speed. Rhonda shivered at the thought that a minute ago, it could have been her inside the yellow overalls.

Cole glanced around looking for something. “We must plug that hole behind us, so no one can follow us. We can’t have thousands of prisoners invading the Garrison.”

“Of course.” Rhonda bit back a sharper comment. To think that Cole still thought of the safety of the other guards before his own... She circumvented the problem. “We don’t have time to plug that hole, and I don’t see how we could, anyway.”

Loud voices in the distance approached quickly. Cole and Rhonda stared at each other.

“You go first, kiddo.” Cole smiled reassuringly. “In case you fall, I can catch you, and if I fall I won’t take you down with me.”

That half patronizing, half chivalrous attitude again, how she loved and hated it. It made her feel weak. Why did he always assume she couldn’t hold her own? He only relied upon her when he had no

other choice, like when he was wounded and helpless.

But the thought of Cole falling to his death troubled her. If by misfortune that happened, she wasn't sure she wanted to go on without him.

Turning on the floodlight at her belt, Rhonda crawled under the overhang of the broken shaft. As she stood up inside and directed her light up, she spotted a network of bunched up wires and tubes of all sizes running up and down three sides of the square space. When she discovered that the fourth wall featured a series of rungs embedded in the duracrete, she felt herself smile.

"There is a ladder!" she whispered. "That means there has to be an exit up there for maintenance personnel."

"Told you." Cole's body blocked the bottom of the shaft as he crawled inside then started climbing below her.

As they ascended, echoes of voices rose up the shaft.

Cole stopped climbing. "Turn off your light," he whispered.

"What?" Rhonda didn't want to be in the dark again.

"Turn it off now. And be quiet."

Rhonda now heard heavy footsteps and could make out individual voices. She understood and reluctantly turned off her floodlight. Thick darkness enveloped them both. Balanced on one rung, holding on to another, Rhonda felt as if she was encased in suffocating blackness, suspended in time, then her eyes adjusted to the dim glow of the aqua floor down below.

She aimed her phaser down but realized shooting in such close quarters would endanger Cole and even herself. The phase beam could bounce inside the narrow shaft and kill them both.

"Would you look at that hole!" a male voice marveled outside the shaft.

Obviously the inmates had discovered the well in which Rhonda almost fell. It wouldn't take long before they peered up under the overhang of the broken pillar. Curiosity was a common trait to all humanoids.

Immobile, Rhonda tried to hold her breath but could only slow it somewhat. Her heart was beating too hard. She couldn't hear Cole breathe but she felt his hand on her ankle and welcomed his reassuring touch.

At the opening below, a face looked up the shaft. Rhonda aimed for it and saw the barrel of Cole's gun doing the same.

"See anything?" asked one of the man's companions.

"Nope." The voice echoed in the shaft. "Just black and creepy."



For once, Rhonda welcomed the blackness shrouding her.

“How far does it go?” asked another male voice.

“No idea,” the peering man said. “Without light I can’t tell.”

“Let’s go get a Juzzaar, they can see in the dark.”

A murmur of approval rose from the man’s companions and the curious face disappeared, only to make room for another, then another curious face.

Not daring to move, breathing shallow, Rhonda wondered how long she could remain still. The face retreated.

After a few seconds that seemed an eternity, Cole whispered, “I think they’re gone. We better get up fast, before they bring a Juzzaar.”

Rhonda needed no prompting. She turned on her floodlight and started climbing the rungs as fast as she could. The swinging light cast moving shadows as she ascended, hand over hand, getting to a proficient rhythm. She could hear the reassuring sound of Cole’s boots below her each time they hit a metal rung.

They passed a horizontal branching with tubes and wiring going in four directions. Each branching bore the number of the corresponding level. They passed thirteen then twelve, then eleven.

Rhonda felt the vibration through her hands holding the rungs and braced herself. “Earthquake!” she warned, choking on the words. Terrified of being crushed, Rhonda held on, hoping the reinforced shaft would hold against the violent tremor rattling the pipes around them.

The vibrations almost jerked her loose but Rhonda tightened her grip on the rungs. “Are you okay?” she asked as the shaking dwindled.

“Watch out!” Cole warned.

Rhonda flattened herself against the ladder. Something bulky whooshed past, followed by smaller debris and gravel that bounced and crashed in a clatter at the broken bottom of the shaft. Rhonda waited, listening to make sure no more debris came their way. She smelled cement dust that dried the skin of her face and parched her throat. “What was that?”

“Not sure, but it might be a blessing. Let’s go.”

Rhonda resumed the difficult climb, hand over hand. “A blessing? It could have killed us.”

“But it didn’t. Such a large chunk of duracrete, with all that gravel and debris will probably block the opening at the bottom of the chimney.”

Glancing down at Cole, Rhonda noticed he looked drawn by the light of her flood lamp. She stopped. “How are you feeling? Is your chest hurting?”

Was it only dust and grime on his face? “I’ll be fine. Keep going.”

“No, you are shaking. The pills are wearing off.” She fished inside her cargo pockets. Only four pills left. She bent down and gave them to Cole. “Take those.”

“Yes Ma’am.” He gobbled the pills and showed his empty hand as proof that he’d swallowed them.

“Only five more levels to climb.” Heartened by the proximity of the Garrison, Rhonda scaled the ladder with all the energy she could muster. Then the realization of their situation struck her. “You mean we are completely sealed inside this shaft? Top and bottom?”

“Don’t worry. It’s much safer for us.”

Safe or not, Rhonda didn’t like it. She found the thought frightening and struggled not to panic. Somehow she managed to climb faster despite her fatigue and the painful strain on her arms and shoulders. Her hands cramped and each rung dug into the sole of her feet through the boots.

Their only possible exit was up, on Level Six, in the safe haven of the Garrison. Trying to ignore the growing anxiety that would certainly overcome her if she gave into it, Rhonda kept climbing the ladder.

Her hands slick with sweat grabbed each warm rung in quick succession. The floodlight hanging at her belt swayed to the tempo of her steps. She prayed God they’d find an exit up there. There had to be one, and Rhonda wouldn’t relax until she found it.

Cole followed at her heels, keeping in synch with her pace. “Almost there, kiddo.”

That nickname, again. Back in the infirmary Cole had used it tenderly, but now Rhonda didn’t know how he meant it. “How many times did I asked you not to call me that?” She immediately regretted her outburst. She felt exhausted and she realized he didn’t mean to hurt her by it.

“Sorry,” Cole mumbled.

Markings at each horizontal branching indicated more levels, and the decreasing numbers gave Rhonda more energy as she progressed up the ladder. Level Nine. The Garrison and their freedom from this abominable place waited just three floors up.

But she had to stop. “My legs are cramping.” She felt his hands massage one calve and moaned with gratitude.

Then Cole massaged her other calve. “Better?”

“Yes, thanks.” As she realized that their chances of surviving this ordeal increased with each upward step, Rhonda considered her situation regarding Cole. What had they done? She felt more and more convinced that they should never have allowed their deeply buried attraction to surface. She had

given into what? Lust? Desperation? Or was it something more?

Up ahead, Rhonda noticed a ray of light. “Looks like there is a hole in our chimney.”

“A hole?” Cole moved to the side to peer up. “Kill your light.”

Rhonda did. She didn’t like the idea of convicts noticing activity inside a pillar, on whatever floor the break had occurred. As they approached the faint light, it became evident that the chunks and debris that almost decapitated them earlier had come from that hole.

Spider web patterns of fissures in the walls around the hole told of a recent impact. As they reached the level of the hole, Rhonda peered outside and realized she stood high above floor level. She also understood what had happened earlier and glanced down at Cole. “Level Eight. Lilac Zone. A ceiling conduit bashed our shaft.”

“Can the inmates see you?”

“No. Come take a look.” Rhonda helped Cole stand at her level.

Both stood on the same narrow rung and peered through the large hole to their right side. The severed conduit still rested precariously on the edge of the hole in the duracrete. Secretly, Rhonda enjoyed the short respite. Her arms and legs couldn’t take much more of this punishment. As they caught their breath, a loud metallic clatter drew their gaze up toward the ceiling of Level Eight.

Rhonda watched with horror as another pipe broke from the ceiling of Level Eight and swung wide, hitting the other end of the conduit resting on the edge of the hole.

“Climb!” Cole yelled and pushed her up.

Rhonda hurried up the rungs, not quite understanding, crowded by Cole who also climbed and half carried her up the ladder.

“Hang on!” Cole stopped and braced her legs against the ladder.

With a white-knuckle grip on the rungs, Rhonda glanced down and screamed. Like a ram, the large conduit suddenly surged inside the chimney and collided with the other side of the shaft, crashing right through it like a thundering bolt.

The vibration reverberated through the ladder and throughout the shaft. Long fissures cracked on all sides. Then Rhonda watched in horror as the chimney under them all but collapsed and fell away, leaving a gaping hole beneath their feet.

As Rhonda looked down the vertiginous drop to the Lilac floor, cold sweat ran down her spine and she shook so much she wasn’t sure she could climb.

“Don’t look down,” Cole said reassuringly. “It missed us.”

So the ram did and they were both alive, but Rhonda reeled with the thought of where they

would be now if Cole hadn't prompted her just in time. They'd both be dead and bloody under the pile of rubble below. A hot draft heavy with body odors and sewage rose from the floor beneath them and assailed her nose.

Cole squeezed her ankle. "Let's go, we are not far now."

Slowly, heart drumming in her chest, Rhonda started up the ladder again, glad she and Cole were still alive.

What would they do after they escaped? Would she miss Cole if they went their separate ways? To think of it, she would. How could two people share their most intimate fears and hopes, the most intense pleasures, save each other's lives, face death together, then just part and forget about each other? Rhonda realized she could never forget Cole. He'd become an integral part of her life.

And why in heaven had she told him about blowing up that shipment to avenge her sister? Now he could send her straight to jail for terrorism. It troubled her that Cole hadn't mentioned their night of passion once since they'd left the infirmary. And when she'd tried to broach the topic, he'd changed the subject. Obviously, he didn't intend to pursue a relationship if they survived. She feared her very first impression of him had been the right one.

She'd opened her heart and soul only to be rejected by a misogynist. To think that a week or so ago she'd hated the man's guts. Although she still resented his patronizing ways, she couldn't get him out of her mind. Back at the infirmary, he'd seemed so different, so caring. What had happened to that lovable Cole? Had she glimpsed the real Cole beneath the attitude? Or an illusion brought about by the drugs in his system?

The last rungs brought them to the edge of a wide horizontal tunnel, and the letters painted on the wall spelled Level Six - Garrison. Rhonda's heart pounded faster. "Where is that door?"

"Have no fear." Cole chuckled. "If I remember right, the exit hatch should be somewhere above the engine room."

Wall markings labeled the various sections of Level Six. Rhonda realized the tunnel paralleled a familiar hallway leading from the Garrison living quarters to the engine room and the monitoring room. A metal sign, fastened above a round hatch of gray titanium with a central wheel, said Engine Room.

"Here it is!" Cole braced himself to turn the wheel.

Rhonda helped him wholeheartedly, and when the wheel started moving, all the fears, the agony, the suffering of the past ten days, somehow washed away as her body and mind welcomed the sanctuary of the Garrison.

She couldn't help but shout with release. "Safe at last."

## Chapter Fifteen

### Level Six - The Garrison

Together Cole and Rhonda pushed the door open and found themselves on the circular catwalk high above the engine room, just as Cole had predicted.

“We may be safe from the convicts, but not from the planet, yet, kiddo.”

Even Cole’s pessimism couldn’t snuff out Rhonda’s relief. “You are such a killjoy, you know that?”

It seemed cooler at that level than in the tunnel, but as Rhonda looked down, the sight of the wreckage on that floor almost crushed her hope.

Heavy equipment had dropped from the ceiling, automatic arms and luminous panels blinked and beeped without attendance. A thick gray dust covered floor and machines. The smell of smoke and burned rubber pervaded the room.

At least, someone had shut down the strident alarm system, but the A.I. kept sending automated messages. “All Garrison personnel, please evacuate the facility immediately...”

Locking the door behind them, Cole didn’t seem surprised by the devastation. “Don’t worry about the Garrison. We don’t need it anymore. All we have to do now is make it to the surface and meet the others on that mercenary ship.”

“Yes, the ship.” Now in known territory, Rhonda took heart. Rushing across the catwalk toward the metallic stairs leading to the floor, she wondered how the surface would look. “We’ll need respirators and arctic Parkas, unless the temperature has risen on the surface as well.”

“The elevators will be out of order. We’ll probably have to take the stairs.” Cole finally sounded excited about getting out.

Her steps and Cole’s echoed on the metallic stairs leading down from the catwalk. Part of the way down, another tremor destabilized Rhonda. Her foot slipped. She grabbed the railing as the skimpy stairs unhinged at the landing and swung high above the engine room. Rhonda hung by one arm as the metal ladder flailed in the air with a dreadful metallic screech. Good God, she hoped she could hold on. She had little strength left.

Above her, Cole, who had a white-knuckle clutch on the railing with one hand, reached for her wrist with the other. Struggling up the flying stairs, Rhonda found a step to wedge her foot and met Cole halfway. Their hands touched, and his reassuring grip on her wrist calmed her panic. How chivalrous again. Why did he keep saving her life if he didn't really care deeply about her? And if he felt for her what she felt for him, then why did he remain so distant?

When the quake finally abated, the twisted flight of stairs didn't connect with the landing or the floor. Using both hands, Rhonda slid down the railing to the bottom of the flight and dangled above the dusty floor. Aiming for a patch of floor without debris or sharp edges, she dropped and hit the floor harder than she expected. Stunned for a few seconds, she rolled aside to make room for Cole.

Cole leapt down next to her. Despite the grime on his face, he looked concerned. "Are you okay, kiddo?"

Grateful to be alive, Rhonda brushed herself and refused his help to get up. When would he understand she could take care of herself? Once on her feet, she took in the familiar surroundings. Here, too, things had changed. Even the Garrison didn't feel like a safe refuge anymore.

"Come on." Cole dashed toward the main hallway.

Rhonda followed gladly, but when they emerged into the wide passage that usually displayed holographic scenes of Earth's natural beauties, they stopped. A dozen fierce soldiers in dark green uniforms now lined the bare gray walls and pointed their weapons at the two guards. Definitely not inmates, not Duran troops or reinforcement guards either. Who were they? They didn't look friendly.

Following Cole's example, Rhonda's drew her phaser. Cole already aimed for the closest soldier but didn't pull the trigger. Neither did the soldiers as they stared, poised to shoot. Holding her breath, a death grip on her phaser, Rhonda waited in the thick silence.

The leader of the group, a young man with a hairless jaw, advanced upon the two guards, weapon in hand, and halted a meter away from Rhonda and Cole. "In the name of Zarah Minoux, legitimate princess of the Andromeda Galaxy, surrender your weapons or die."

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Cole couldn't believe what he'd just heard. Zarah Minoux? The dangerous political prisoner? Now the discovery of the mercenary ship on the surface made sense. It must be their ship, and they would certainly fight to keep it. What had happened to the other guards?

Obviously, these soldiers pointing their phasers at Cole and Rhonda had come to free the elusive

rebel princess. Where was she? Not here, obviously. Some rebel soldiers looked young and scared while seasoned armed warriors stared at Cole like hardened professionals with nothing to lose. A few young fanatics with unreadable faces seemed ready to pull the trigger at the slightest sign from their leader. All of them looked human, all of them dangerous.

Cole didn't stand a chance against a superior number of armed professional soldiers. Still, he hesitated. But the look of determination in the rebel's faces told him they would shoot if he didn't capitulate. When he motioned Rhonda to drop her phaser, she laid it on the floor with some reluctance.

Crouching slowly, Cole set down his weapon then rose, hands up in surrender. He hated the funny feeling that twisted his gut. Cole had lost control of the situation and couldn't stand seeing his post of twelve years overrun by rebels. The Garrison had been his home, his command. How dare they take it from him?

The young officer called two soldiers to check Cole and Rhonda. As Cole struggled to keep calm, hands behind his head, he felt the soldier patting him. The man found the yataghan blade in his boot and threw it on the floor. The other soldier found Rhonda's dagger, then a woman soldier gathered the weapons and took them away. Cole noticed many females among the troops. Of course, a princess would favor her own gender.

Cole remembered how Rhonda so easily adapted to new situations. He had to be flexible and loosen up if he wanted to find a way to save his crew. He'd always played by the rules before and would never have considered negotiating with criminals, but Cole had already broken many rules since this ordeal had begun.

In these desperate circumstances, Cole must think of the safety of the guards. He had little to offer in exchange for their lives, but the most palatable currency for that kind of thugs would be weapons. Cole knew hundreds of crates stored in the armory contained thousands of firearms, phasers and blades.

As repulsive as it sounded, Cole might have to cut a deal with the rebels as a last resort to save his crew. He hoped it wasn't too late already. "May I speak to whoever is in charge of your gang?"

"We are not a gang." The rebel officer seemed offended. "We are the extended personal guard of our royal princess, Zarah Minoux!"

Cole held up one hands in entreaty. "Sorry, I didn't mean to offend anyone."

The rebel officer motioned with his gun for Cole and Rhonda to march ahead of him in the direction of the recreational quarters. "Quickly. We have little time."

Raised on Upsilon Three in the Andromeda system, Cole now recognized the colors of the

uniform. Emerald and forest green. The colors of the former royal family of Andromeda. As he walked down the gray hallway, he tried to remember more of what he'd read about Zarah Minoux in her file.

Her rebel fighters had threatened the profitable peace established by Duran in the Andromeda Galaxy. She'd been incarcerated for inciting terrorist attacks upon the corporation. Duran had zero tolerance for terrorists, and Cole fully agreed on that point, although...

Cole winced at the memory that Rhonda herself had committed an act of terrorism upon Duran after the death of her sister. Lately, it had become more and more difficult to make just decisions. He gave Rhonda a reassuring smile. How could he possibly blame her?

A tremor shook the hallway, confirming the urgency of their situation. Cole spread his stance for balance and checked on Rhonda. She looked fine. Mighty fine, despite the caked dust and the scratches on her face. The quake subsided but the next one could bury the Garrison under tons of debris.

As he hurried alongside Rhonda, Cole thought about the Andromeda royal family but the name only conjured images of the chained princess mentioned in the Earth legends he'd studied on Upsilon Three.

In Greek Mythology, Princess Andromeda had been the embodiment of feminine beauty. Andromeda's mother had insulted the god Poseidon by likening her beauty to that of the Naiades. When the oracle told Andromeda's father the only way to appease the god and save his people was to sacrifice his daughter, he'd reluctantly tied the beautiful Andromeda to a rock on the shore, and left her to be devoured by a sea monster.

But the mythical hero Perseus, passing by on his horse, saw the gorgeous princess in peril and saved her by defeating and killing the sea monster. Then Perseus married Andromeda, and together they started a long line of mythical heroes.

As Cole, Rhonda, and their captors approached the training gym, Cole hoped these royal soldiers would accept his plea to save the guards, and have the good sense to leave very soon. He entered the gym and gasped.

On the wood floor, crates of weapons from the Garrison's extensive armory lay in stacks, each container marked with the unmistakable seal of the Duran Corporation. A few soldiers opened the crates and took a quick inventory while others carried the inventoried containers away, presumably to their ship.

Cole fought to control his anger but couldn't help shouting. "What the hell do you think you are doing? This is Duran property."

The soldier behind him punched Cole's kidney. "You speak with respect in Princess Zarah's



presence.”

The force of the blow sent radiating pain throughout Cole’s body. He felt Rhonda’s arms supporting him as he struggled to remain standing. Cole suppressed an expletive. He didn’t see any princess around.

“Hold your torpedoes, Sarge!” Raylor, his gray uniform in disarray, detached himself from a small group of rebels checking the crates and came to meet Cole. “Sorry about that, Captain.” Raylor waved away the young officer. “I’ll vouch for them. Return to your post.”

“Raylor! What the hell are you doing with these people? Did you open the armory for them?” Cole never quite trusted Raylor, but now he understood why. The man simply had no principles. “Helping an escapee is treason. You are arming dangerous terrorists.” The irony that Cole himself had the same thought, although for a nobler cause, didn’t soften his anger.

“These people are my friends.” Raylor offered a casual smile. “You don’t understand.”

“Nor do I care to.” Cole had enough of Raylor’s slack attitude and regained his natural authority. “Where are the other guards?”

Raylor seemed amused. “Don’t get excited, Captain. We are trying to help them.” Did he find that funny?

“Trying?” Anger rose in Cole’s throat. “That’s not good enough. Where are they?”

“Several are on their way,” Raylor volunteered almost reluctantly. “Others have not reported in yet, but we still have hope.”

“So, I assume you have a pilot, too?” Cole wondered where Raylor found one. Had he broken into the prisoner’s files?

Raylor smiled coyly. “You are looking at him. That’s my ship up there.”

Then all became clear. Raylor had not betrayed the Garrison. He had been a mercenary in the employ of Zarah Minoux from the start. He had infiltrated the Garrison for an ulterior purpose. Cole shook with rage at the betrayal. “You’ve been preparing her escape since you hired on as a guard?”

Raylor shrugged and offered an embarrassed smile. “Things are rarely what they seem.”

“You, son-of-a-bitch. And for the past ten days, we’ve been looking for a way out. You knew there was a hidden ship all along, and you didn’t tell us? We could’ve gotten killed a hundred times down there!” Cole rushed Raylor, intent on smashing his face.

Raylor side-stepped.

Rhonda grabbed Cole and pulled him back with unexpected strength. “Cool off, Captain,” she shouted. “We’ve got to get out of here. All of us.”

Frustrated, Cole snorted and shook his head in disgust. “Who will gather the Garrison crew?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of them.” Raylor casually stepped back and remained at a safe distance.

“How? By killing them all? I don’t trust a mercenary with multiple allegiances.” Cole glared at Raylor. “I should be directing the rescue and be the last one to leave.”

Raylor scoffed. “But you are not in charge, anymore, Captain. So you do as we say.”

The insult enraged Cole further. “And who’s we?” He had enough of Raylor’s sick games.

“That would be me.” Stepping out from behind a stack of crates, Princess Zarah Minoux looked regal all right, although she was petite and seemed to favor one foot. Her long straight auburn hair, parted in the middle, fell on each side of her perfect oval face. Somehow, she had traded her prison smock for a uniform of emerald and forest green. Only a gold piping and the silky material differentiated her garb from that of her troops, but natural authority flowed from her lips and her proud bearing. “Captain Cole Riggeur, I heard much about you, and I would like your word that you will not endanger this operation.”

“Impossible.” Cole could not accept the idea of letting a terrorist escape. “I’ll never endorse your methods.”

Rhonda stepped between the two and scolded Cole like a child. “Then make an alliance to save your crew.” Rhonda had said the magic words. The crew...

How could Cole condemn his guards? He took the measure of the princess. “You would take them to safety?”

Zarah Minoux smiled. “I already made an advantageous deal with Raylor for the weapons. And I promise you we will do our utmost to help the guards make it to our ship as safely as possible.”

“Thanks.” Still furious at Raylor, although a minute earlier Cole had been ready to do the same, Cole couldn’t help admonishing him. “How could you sell them our weapons? You despicable weasel.”

“Actually, Raylor here saved your miserable life.” Zarah Minoux sounded impatient. “He blackmailed me to take you and the other guards on board. I agreed against my better judgment, but I can still change my mind.”

Cole refused to trust a convict, princess or not. He hated his situation. “And why would an escapee help the guards?”

“I hold no grudge,” Princess Zarah said with conviction. “They are not responsible for my wrongful imprisonment.”

“Wrongful?” The word arrested Cole thoughts. “Did you say wrongful imprisonment?”

“You heard me right.” Princess Zarah took a deep breath. “Duran wanted me out of the way. When legal means and corruption didn’t work, they framed me for terrorism. I did nothing to deserve incarceration, and even less the torture and the humiliations Duran inflicted upon me.” Her angry tone and the emotion that choked her voice left no doubt about the veracity of her accusations.

“I’m so sorry,” Rhonda volunteered. “They tortured my sister, too.”

Cole had heard rumors about Duran torturing prisoners for information despite the Treaty of Vestusta that guaranteed the humane treatment of inmates. But he’d never been able to verify the rumors and certainly never had heard a first hand accusation. Disgusted by the very concept, he hid his compassion behind professional coolness. “Listen to any convict, and they’ll make you believe they are innocent.”

“Believe what you want. I intend to denounce Duran’s tactics, clear my name, and regain my throne.” Zarah’s tone softened. “You kindly let me take the weapons and agree not to make any trouble, and I’ll let you and your guards on my rescue ship, although you, Captain, will have to travel in the brig.”

“In the brig? Like a criminal?” Cole wanted to scream.

“How about that?” Princess Zarah laughed. “How does it feel to be imprisoned when you didn’t do anything wrong? Believe me, I know the feeling.”

Funny how fast the tables had turned on Cole. “Am I a prisoner, then?”

“A friendly one if you cooperate.” Princess Zarah crossed her arms on her chest and looked at him askance. “It’s a long trip, Captain, and I don’t want you to change your mind and take over my ship, or foment a mutiny. I promise your incarceration on our ship will be humane.” Her expression hardened. “But if you refuse my conditions, I can have you executed right here and now. Deal or no deal?”

Rhonda squeezed Cole’s arm. “Even if a few prisoners escape in the process, it’s worth bending the rules, Captain.”

In no position to bargain, Cole reluctantly admitted defeat and sighed. “Deal.”

“Good.” The princess addressed Rhonda as if Cole didn’t even exist. “Do you vouch for him?”

Rhonda glanced at Cole surreptitiously then faced Zarah again. “Me? Why me?”

“Let’s just say you strike me as a no-nonsense woman, and I tend to trust women who think for themselves.” Zarah’s gaze darted from Cole to Rhonda. “Also, women do not torture prisoners.” Princess Zarah crossed her arms in front of her chest, waiting. “You tell me. Can I trust him?”

Feeling like a child trying to figure out what he'd done wrong, Cole watched the two women decide his fate. When had it come to this? He didn't dare speak for fear of making things worse.

Did Rhonda enjoy the power she had over Cole? "The Captain is good at honoring his word, but..." Rhonda hesitated for a few endless seconds. Her face finally relaxed. "Well, let's say he has his flaws, but he's the most honorable, kind, and reliable man I've ever met. I trust him with my life, Zarah."

The last comment surprised Cole, but he breathed easier. He appreciated loyalty above all, and Rhonda was loyal to him.

The princess smiled. "Good. I'll leave him in your charge, then." Out of her pocket she pulled two green armbands and handed them to Rhonda. "Wear them at all times. My fighters on the surface have orders to kill anyone not wearing our colors."

"Thank you." Rhonda bowed slightly as she took the silky armbands.

Under Princess Zarah's gaze, Rhonda tied one armband to Cole's arm, then handed the other to him and offered her arm.

Cole obliged her and tied it on tight. Something still bothered him in Rhonda's comments. Had she said flaws? Cole always tried to be perfect, to do the right thing, but hell, it hadn't been easy of late. He'd have to ask her what she considered his flaws.

Princess Zarah motioned to a woman soldier. "Give them back their weapons."

"You trust a prisoner with weapon?" Cole thought the princess sorely lacked logic for a leader.

"Are you telling me I shouldn't?" Zarah raised one eyebrow as if daring him to answer.

"I didn't say that." Cole felt foolish. After all he'd just given his word, but he didn't really expect the princess to keep hers.

"We made a pact, didn't we?" Did Zarah enjoy playing with Cole? "We are on the same team, Captain. Besides, there might be dangers in the tunnels as well as on the surface. We may all have to fight together."

"Dangers?" Cole could only think of earthquakes and cold weather on the surface, but these did not require phasers or knives. "You mean bearcats?"

"Did you say bearcats?" Zarah laughed good-heartedly. "I'm talking about real dangers, Captain, like escaped convicts. Some of them have reached the upper levels and may already be on the surface."

"Of course." Cole berated himself for this oversight. If Zarah had reached the Garrison, other convicts had made it this far as well.

The fact that Zarah didn't believe in bearcats didn't reassure Cole. None of the rare souls who ever met one face to face had survived to tell the story, but that didn't make them less real. Although none had been sighted in years, Cole suspected such dangerous creatures still inhabited the frozen surface. He gladly accepted his phaser and yataghan blade. Rhonda slid her phaser and dagger into place as well.

Cole's mind, now recovered from the shock of this unexpected invasion, and the humiliation he'd just suffered at the hands of a woman, turned to more practical matters. "How's the temperature outside?"

"Unpredictable," Princess Zarah said, matter-of-fact. "The landscape is changing every ten minutes. Still frozen in places, but new volcanoes are popping up everywhere. The ice is melting into boiling lakes, but the surface water can re-freeze within minutes."

"Do we need a respirator?" Rhonda's question seemed childish to Cole and reminded him that she'd never been on the surface.

The princess nodded. "Take one. There are pockets of toxic gasses."

"After all that damage, what's the best route to get up there?" Cole suspected the stairs might be out of the question, too slow.

The princess motioned toward the hallway. "We use the mining tunnels still accessible from the engine room, but some of them are starting to flood." Zarah offered a disarming smile. "Good luck to you both." She walked away toward the stack of crates.

Trying to make the best of a humiliating situation, Cole winked at Rhonda and motioned toward the line of soldiers marching out of the gym. "Let's go, then."

Cole and Rhonda fell in line with the company of soldiers. Two by two, the rebels carried the heavy crates in the direction of the engine room. Primitive but efficient. No sense in using vehicles with all the debris littering the hallways. Besides, the vehicles probably didn't run anymore.

As much as Cole hated this situation, he could not afford to be choosy. Rebels had overrun his Garrison, but so what? Zurin Five would soon be history anyway. He could think of worse things than being at the mercy of a compassionate escapee. Zarah had agreed to save the guards, hadn't she? Cole damn well hoped the Princess would keep her word, or else he swore she'd have to answer for the lives of his crew.

Finally, Cole convinced himself that things had started to look up. Besides, between a month's trip in a brig and imminent death, Cole saw only one viable option. He realized he very much wanted to live, get off this rock, and make a new life for himself, a different kind of life.

Somewhere on the surface, not too far away, the mercenary ship awaited. No matter the price to his pride, Cole would welcome salvation from this unforgiving hell, for him and his crew. And none deserved it more than Rhonda.

## Chapter Sixteen

### Level Six - The Garrison

The temperature inside the Garrison kept rising steadily. Dripping with sweat, Rhonda hurried alongside Cole in the line of rebels and mercenaries carrying the crates of company weapons. At a swift, military pace, they went through dim crumbling hallways.

Rhonda remembered the first time she'd walked through that same hallway on the first day she'd joined the Garrison. How the vivid scenes of cerulean seas, white beaches, and red canyons had dazzled her. "I'm going to miss the scenic holograms." She realized with surprise that she really would.

"Believe me, I won't." Cole looked so serious, or maybe still mad about having to deal with the rebels.

Rhonda wanted to lighten his mood. "When I get back to Banoi, I'll try to recreate the pictures from memory in art form."

Cole scoffed. "Don't get too excited, kiddo. We are not out of this hell yet."

A young soldier carrying a crate and walking in front of them glanced back with a disapproving stare. Rhonda noticed that none of the rebels spoke in the ranks and all wore their uniforms buttoned all the way up despite the heat. No wonder Rhonda disliked regimented life.

The choking smell of burnt circuitry and settling dust sticking to her skin brought Rhonda back to the harsh reality. As the small company moved from collapsed rooms to grim hallways, all the doors stood wide open, something unheard of when the Garrison functioned. Regulations requested that all doors remained closed at all times.

Traces of fire blackened the walls in places, in others, dirty water dripped from the ceiling and pooled on the floor. Sophisticated equipment lay in haphazard piles, reduced to useless junk. What a waste!

Even the spa facility, the former pride of the Garrison, lay in shambles. As they crossed it, the soldiers stared in disbelief at the shattered glass walls and cracked marble floors. A few of the pools lay empty, others, half-filled with soiled water, contained sunken junk and floating garbage.

When the small company reached the arctic gear room, the officer at the head of the column

ordered the soldiers to stop. Rhonda noticed heaps of green bundles, parkas and boots of the same green as the soldiers' uniforms. Each rebel grabbed one bundle and slung it on one shoulder. They seemed very organized.

Out of a guard's locker Rhonda pulled out a yellow parka, Eskimo boots, gloves in her size, and a respirator. "Good thing this bulky stuff is lightweight." Usually they would have dressed in the locker room, but the sweltering temperature didn't allow for that.

Cole tied his gear by the strings into a bundle and did the same for Rhonda. "You sling it over your shoulder like this." He demonstrated for her.

Carrying her bundle, Rhonda filed in with the procession of green-clad soldiers. They walked briskly through a maze of dimly lit tunnels, just wide enough for two soldiers to walk side by side while carrying a crate between them. Only short vertical shafts linking the tunnels at various levels and equipped with metal ladders slowed their progress. Rhonda and Cole had to help lift the heavy crates up the shafts.

Living things scurried into dark recesses as the company walked by. Bugs? Rats? Rhonda never thought the mining tunnels would support so much life, but evidently they offered a choice shelter from the frozen surface.

Water dripped through the stone walls in places and mixed with the dust and the dirt on the tunnel floor. Planks spanned the mud where it went too deep. The temperature in the tunnels grew suffocating, along with the stink of natural gas pockets and decomposing things. Rhonda's feet sloshed into sticky goo and the whole column slowed down. Then the mud turned to deep fluid.

Wading in the black water that smelled of sulfur, Rhonda advanced carefully, so as not to get in over her boots. She hated soaked feet and although she'd never been on the frozen surface, she knew about frostbite, even through insulated gear.

The lights flickered, the tunnel walls groaned and seemed to close in. Heart pounding, Rhonda stopped, turned on her floodlight and held her breath. *Dear God, don't abandon us now.* As the earth shook, everyone in the tunnel stopped and waited.

Gravel and dust fell from the low ceiling. A crack opened in the wall, and water gushed through, inundating the tunnel floor. The tremor seemed to last forever. Had Rhonda reached the Garrison only to die buried alive with the rats? No. Not this time. The tremor seemed to decrease in intensity.

Just ahead of Rhonda and Cole, someone screamed. The ground opened up and the young rebel in front of them suddenly let go of the crate and dropped his arctic gear bundle as he washed into a deep crevice. His hands clawed at the edge of the hole, but the recruit slid inexorably deeper into the cavity



that filled with rushing dark water.

Cole dropped down and grabbed the young soldier by one wrist . He glanced up at Rhonda. “I got him, but I need some help.”

Rhonda could see the young man’s hand in Cole’s grasp, but the soldier’s entire body had disappeared into the water hole. Cole pulled while Rhonda and the soldier’s partner fished inside the dark water to get a better grip on him.

As the young man struggled, his other hand flailed out of the narrow pool.

Rhonda grasped the hand. “Got it!”

Cole nodded. “Pull!”

Rhonda and Cole’s breathless grunts filled the air, but the young recruit didn’t budge.

“He’s stuck in there! He’s going to drown!” Rhonda heard the panic in her own voice.

As she and Cole pulled harder, something gave, and the young man’s head finally emerged. He gasped and coughed water while his partner seized his emerging shoulders and lifted him out of the hole to sit him on the edge.

Dripping with mud, a terrified look stamped on his pale face, the young recruit faced his rescuers. “Thank you.” He coughed. “You saved my life.”

The other rebels in the company cheered at the sight of the young man rising to his feet with his partner’s help. Rhonda felt relieved to see the boy unharmed. Cole retrieved the man’s bundle and handed it to him. The recruit took it and smiled.

“Let me carry that crate for you,” Cole offered.

“Sorry, can’t do that.” The young recruit picked up the handle on his side of the crate and nodded to his partner.

“Everyone all right?” yelled an officer somewhere ahead of them. Without waiting for a response, he ordered, “Let’s go.”

Avoiding the gaping hole in the tunnel floor and spreading the word down the line for the rest of the company, the cortege resumed its progression through more tunnels. Finally, they emerged into a wide ascending shaft, like a stone ramp at a rather steep incline.

“This one goes straight to the surface.” Cole winked and started up the ramp.

The pitch of the slope tested Rhonda’s sore muscles. As she climbed, her thighs and calves felt like wood. Soon, however, they reached a flat landing the size of a small hangar, closed by a pair of massive metal doors. It looked like the end of the tunnel. All stopped. The soldiers set down the crates. Four of them, armed with crowbars, hurried toward the heavy doors as if to pry them open.

“Wait,” Cole yelled, with such authority that they stopped and turned to him with surprise. Cole signaled to Rhonda. “We can do that for you.”

Rhonda understood. She went to the control pad at the left side of the massive doors while Cole went to the right. She applied her hand on the scanner. So did Cole on the other side, and the huge doors grated as they slid slowly on their rail.

Rhonda rejoiced at the sight of daylight in the distance, less than a hundred meters away. Soon, they would finally be safe.

The open door, however, let in an icy draft. The temperature fell suddenly, and Rhonda attacked the knots of her arctic gear bundle.

“Get dressed,” ordered the commanding officer.

The soldiers obeyed, and Rhonda wondered whether they could do anything of their own accord, without being told.

“Don’t forget the armband,” Cole reminded her as he pulled the yellow insulated footwear on top of his gray boots. “We don’t want to get shot by mistake.”

“Right.” Rhonda removed her green armband, handed it to Cole, then donned her arctic parka and offered her arm.

Cole tied the armband over her fat yellow sleeve. Rhonda enjoyed his touch, even through the thick gear, and she wondered whether he felt the same tingle. Would they ever make love again? The very thought of imminent freedom filled her with tender feelings.

As she returned the favor by tying his armband for him, her hand lingered on his arm, but Cole didn’t react or acknowledge the gesture. Confused, Rhonda donned her Eskimo over-boots, still hoping for a kind word from Cole.

But all he said was, “Never been outside?”

Shaking her head, Rhonda let him open the front of her parka and remove her weapon belt.

Then Cole closed her parka and secured the belt on top of it. “Just in case we need to defend ourselves.” He smiled and adjusted his own holster belt.

Rhonda shuddered at the idea that they might have to fight, out there on the surface. She felt clumsy, all tied up in the bulky gear like a doll in bubble wrap. Struggling to keep a positive outlook, she fumbled with the respirator.

“Let me help you.” Cole clipped the small mask to her collar, gently pushed her hair away from her face and hooked the elastic band around her head. Then he pulled up the hood of her parka. “Keep the hood up at all times.” He adjusted the clear visor. “It also protects your face from the glaring sun

and the cold. Breathe slowly at first.”

“How do I look?” Rhonda mimicked a model turn on an imaginary runway.

Cole laughed. “I’d say we both look like fat yellow chicken mascots.”

While Rhonda practiced breathing through the apparatus, she pulled on her gloves and watched Cole finish dressing. She wondered how to interpret his attentiveness. Did it mean anything special? Cole always looked out for his guards.

Did he treat her like just another guard or like a lover? Rhonda burned to ask him, but too many soldiers surrounded them. She felt self-conscious in such company.

Someone gave an order, and Cole and Rhonda resumed their trek with the rest of the soldiers toward the circle of light at the end of the tunnel. The parka and boots seriously impeded Rhonda’s movements. But as she walked she started to feel lighter and lighter on her feet and remembered the difference in gravity. As they gradually left the artificial gravity of the mining complex, she had to acclimate herself to the natural conditions.

From a physics class long ago, Rhonda remembered that the size and mass of a planet usually defined its gravity. And Zurin Five, only the size of a small moon, had extremely low gravity.

Rhonda resisted the urge to jump to see how high she could leap. She would probably lose her balance, or bump her head on the ceiling and fall, then bounce on her butt, shaming herself in front of the soldiers. The thought made her giggle. No way she could ever run in that gear. Hopefully she wouldn’t have to.

When she walked out of the open mineshaft into the bright sunlight intensified by the glare of snow and ice, Rhonda blinked. Within two seconds, however, the visor of her respirator darkened automatically to shield her eyes. They had emerged from the base of a small hill onto the frozen expanse.

A loud rumble to her right caught Rhonda’s attention. A sudden vent of steam rushed out of a volcano, just a few kilometers away. Black smoke billowed high in the pure lavender sky, hurling fiery lava rocks high into the atmosphere. On the surrounding slopes, ice hissed into instant steam jets under the assault of incandescent lava snaking down from the belching crater. Fire and ice vied for supremacy.

“Get back!” Cole’s yell came muffled by his respirator. He propelled Rhonda back into the mouth of the mineshaft, where she bounced for lack of gravity.

Retrieving her balance, Rhonda saw the soldiers drop their crates and run for cover as half a dozen molten rocks the size of giant bowling balls rained down as if in slow motion. Just outside the

mouth of the mine, the rocks impacted then sizzled and steamed as they melted deep black holes into the frozen snow.

Heart hammering her chest, Rhonda realized they were still far from safe. “Where is that ship? Can’t it just come to us?”

Cole shook his head. “There is no landing pad here. The ground is too uneven.” He pointed at the volcano. “According to the coordinates, the platform is on the other side of that fire breathing monster. Should be about four kilometers in a straight line, but skirting the lava makes it more like ten or twelve.”

“Great!” Rhonda could run a ten-K in less than a standard hour, but it would take three times that long to walk around the fiery hill in the stupid gear.

Cole walked to one of the crates the soldiers had dropped. He picked it up easily and winked at Rhonda. “Low gravity has its advantages.” Lifting the crate above his head, he held it like a shield then motioned Rhonda to join him underneath.

Delighted at Cole’s creative thinking, Rhonda joined him under the crate and helped him hold it up. Although the deadly shower had ceased for now, a few soldiers imitated Cole’s shielding technique as the company deployed onto the snow. For the first time since they’d left the gym, Rhonda could see their entire group. She counted fifteen soldiers as the column advanced in a wide arc to the left, around the base of the spitting volcano.

Rhonda worried about the ship. With the landing platform so close to the eruption, would it be there, intact, after they crossed that dangerous zone? Was the officer in command of the company in communication with the waiting ship? None of the men were talking, even less sharing information. Rhonda had no idea of what they would find over there. She felt out of the loop, powerless, at the mercy of strangers.

Images of whole towns choked in volcanic ashes came to Rhonda’s mind. First, the burning breath incinerated the lungs. Then the volcano buried the victims under copious lava flows. Would they suffer the same horrible death?

While the lavender sky remained clear behind them, they headed straight for the darkness under the solid cloud of smoke and ash that shadowed the volcano.

A sudden impact on the shielding crate knocked Rhonda down. As she fell, she saw the projectile bouncing away and sizzling in the snow. Cole still held the crate above their heads and offered her a hand to get up. Accepting his help, Rhonda rose to her feet and smiled then realized that Cole couldn’t see her face through the darkened visor. “Thanks. You have good reflexes.”

“Let’s keep going.”

More soldiers raised their crates above their heads for protection as more scalding rocks fell from the dark cloud. Geysers of hissing steam spouted all around them, heating the atmosphere for a few seconds, then the steam froze in mid air and broke into pieces of ice that crunched under the thick boots.

An earth tremor prompted Rhonda to drop down and hug the icy ground. Cole threw aside the crate that bounced a few meters away and joined her in the snow. The crater roiled and released more black smoke as if to compete with the quake. Looking up, Rhonda saw a tongue of lava gushing over the rim. Now it rushed down the slope toward them.

“Move!” Cole grabbed Rhonda’s hand and leapt to the side.

Jumping with him in a giant step, Rhonda collapsed on the snow four meters away from the trajectory of the lava flow. Quite a leap.

Just above them on the slope, the rebel soldiers scurried away to escape the fiery river snaking downhill. The swift lava glowed like fire as it rushed past them in a hiss of steam, scorching the area where they had been lying seconds ago.

The temperature must have risen around them, but Rhonda realized the insulated gear might work against extreme heat as well as cold. Good thing her visor didn’t fog up or frost, or she would be completely blind.

The sudden melting of ice and the rising temperature created swirling streams that cascaded downhill. As the ground shook, a deep rift opened, separating Rhonda and Cole from the rest of the company. Rhonda thought of jumping across it to join the others, but the gap widened so fast, she realized she wouldn’t make it. With foreboding, she watched the rebel soldiers getting farther and farther as the opposite side of the rift moved away.

She looked at Cole, lying next to her, but she couldn’t see his face through his darkened visor. “What are we going to do?”

Cole waved reassuringly. “We’ll just have to find our own way to the ship,” he said through the respirator.

Unable to stand on the moving ice, Rhonda watched from the edge, as the wide fissure now filled with swirling water. A flushing sound made her look up. A roaring waterfall tumbled down the hill from a large hole in the mountainside. Bewildered and scared, Rhonda crawled on all fours, retreating as fast as she could away from the forming lake. Cole moved alongside her on his hands and knees.

Once at a safer distance from the edge of the cliff above the churning waters, Rhonda turned back and saw the rebel soldiers on the other side of the rising lake, scrambling for higher ground. Their

numbers had dwindled.

Glancing higher up the slope, Rhonda saw a huge lava flow, almost a kilometer wide, descending quickly upon the soldiers. Caught between the lava and the lake, some rebels jumped into the swirling water. Others waited, as if paralyzed by fear. The quick flowing lava picked them up, screaming and flailing, onto the burning carpet that dropped them into the lake, where they disappeared.

But the lake was filling fast and all the lava pouring into it made the water level rise quickly. A bank of snow and ice broke from the edge and fell in.

“Watch out for the tidal wave!” Cole hurried away from the lake.

Taking giant steps, Rhonda ran after him. She hoped some soldiers would surface. But after she and Cole reached a safe distance from the shore, a glance at the lake told her none of the unfortunate rebels had emerged from the stormy waters. A large wave washed over the rugged shores. When it receded back into the lake, leaving the shore strewn with steaming rocks, Rhonda saw no sign of the unfortunate rebels.

Rhonda thought she should grieve for these courageous soldiers, but the shock and the enormity of the event left her unable to feel. Her eyes remained dry.

Cole pulled on her sleeve. “We have to go.”

He was right. They had to hurry if they didn’t want to meet the same fate. The weapon crate that had served as shield against projectiles now lay at the bottom of the lake. Only speed could increase their chances of reaching the ship safely.

The constant vibrations pummeling the ground threatened Rhonda’s precarious balance. She fell several times, so did Cole. Each time, they helped each other up. Dodging the lava rocks falling at random around them, they advanced relentlessly in the general direction of the landing platform.

Rhonda breathed heavily into the respirator, thankful for the fact that she didn’t have to inhale the ashes that now fell around them like a thick veil. The combination of steam and smoke obscured her vision.

Walking in a gray fog, Rhonda couldn’t see more than a meter in front of her. Without a compad for guidance, they would get lost. She stopped, disoriented. Now she couldn’t see even her hands in front of her face.

Cole nudged her forward. “Wipe your visor with your sleeve.”

Surprised, Rhonda did. She realized the ash had accumulated and clung to the clear material. Now she could see again.

“We can’t stop here. We have to move out of this cloud.”

Rhonda felt lost. “But we could be going in the wrong direction!”

“No the mountain slope is still to our right. Just keep going.”

Shutting out the fear, Rhonda hurried alongside Cole. She didn’t want to think of what might come down that mountain at anytime.

He grabbed her thick-gloved hand. “Better stay close or we’ll get separated. In this soup we’d never find each other again.”

Slightly reassured by Cole’s grip through the glove, Rhonda wondered whether they would ever get off of this infernal planet. How could they possibly see a ship in this murk? To make it worse, ash kept accumulating on her visor, and she had to keep wiping it off with her sleeve. “We could get fifty meters from the ship and not even see it!”

“We’ll just have to hope for the best.”

Rhonda knew they couldn’t give up or they’d die for sure. But they didn’t have much time. At that rate of degradation, the planet had almost reached critical stage, and it wouldn’t be long before the conditions worsened. Within a few hours, the frozen planet would become an inferno, burning up the oxygen of its atmosphere. Then all life on it would perish.

As she plodded along, the vibration under her feet intensified. She looked up at Cole but couldn’t see his face through the dusty visor.

She clutched his sleeve just as he stumbled. Another rift split the ground at their feet. Cole fell away from her. Losing balance, Rhonda dropped to the ice and hung on to him. But Cole kept slipping down the edge of the opening abyss, taking her with him. Worse, she could not hang on to him very long. She felt her glove slipping!

She reached with her other hand. “Grab it,” she yelled, hoping he could hear her above the furious roar of the dying planet, all the time searching for a better anchor for her feet on the uneven ice.

As Cole dangled above the abyss, struggling to grasp her other hand, Rhonda looked down. A mistake. Down below, in the dizzying depths, a lake of incandescent lava swirled ominously. Pockets of gas ignited and whooshed around its edges like the many breaths of a raging dragon. The heat from the flames threatened to melt Rhonda’s visor, but without it her skin would surely blister, and the fiery glare might blind her forever.

Cole looked faint through the dusty visor, as if he couldn’t sustain the effort. He seemed unable to reach with his other hand. Was he in pain? Rhonda thought about his recent surgery. Had the energy pills worn off again? This time, she didn’t have anymore left.

So Rhonda gripped his arm with both hands, as hard as she could. Her foot found a small hole in

the ice and she wedged it there for anchor. Fortunately the low gravity made Cole much lighter than his weight in standard gravity.

Careful not to jolt him too much, Rhonda started to sway Cole gently from side to side, like a pendulum. When he swayed high enough, she threw him over the rim in a wide arc to the side. He landed smoothly next to her, and she quickly pulled him away from the ledge. He held his arm close to his body as if in pain.

“Are you all right? Does your arm hurt? Your chest?”

A nervous laugh escaped Cole’s respirator. “I’ll be fine. Just a little dizzy.”

Rhonda didn’t know how to break the news, so she just told him. “The last pills you took are wearing off. You have to be very careful now. Without medication, you are fragile, like a normal recovering patient.”

“Perfect timing.” The irony in Cole’s comment didn’t escape Rhonda. So close to their goal, this was indeed the wrong time for him to lose his strength.

As she helped Cole up, a stormy wind rose and threatened to blow them away like flimsy foil. Rhonda shoved Cole behind a boulder, readjusted her glove and held onto the rock while keeping a firm grip on Cole’s good arm.

When the windstorm relented, most of the ash had cleared, affording them a decent view of the scenery ahead.

“Look.” Rhonda couldn’t keep the excitement out of her voice as she pointed to a flat area in the distance, less than a kilometer away. Poised like a dark tortoise on its four landing pods, it was the mercenary ship. “They must be waiting for us! We’ve got to hurry.”

Cole grunted as he set his body in motion.

Rhonda wiped the thick curtain of ashes covering his visor. “Can you make it?”

“Don’t worry about me.”

But she did. With the ship in sight, however, Rhonda dared to hope all would be well, and it gave her new strength. The way to the ship looked ridden with crevices and lava-flows, but she could almost taste safety. She set a slow pace while keeping a close eye on Cole.

When they came upon a deep but relatively narrow fissure that barred their path, Rhonda saw no way around it. She feared for Cole as she asked, “Can you jump across?”

Cole nodded.

Although she knew she could easily make the jump in low gravity, she didn’t trust Cole’s strength right now. “Are you sure?”



Cole walked away from the rift as if measuring his steps. Was he going to run for momentum? Rhonda held her breath. *Dear God, watch over us.*

When she saw him run in long steps then fly over the gap, she forgot to breathe. Her heart beat faster and joy filled her chest when she realized he'd landed safely on the other side. Exhilarated by Cole's performance, she decided to take momentum as well.

She discovered she could take giant steps and she leapt high over the abyss, landing far beyond her mark on safe ground. Relieved, she laughed but noticed that Cole hadn't moved.

"Cole?"

He seemed transfixed, staring away from the ship.

Rhonda followed the direction of his gaze, and her heart stuck in her throat.

A group of people, not all human, rushed toward them at great speed. Unencumbered by insulated gear, they hopped and leapt and ran in long steps. Rhonda saw no soldiers or mercenaries among them, no guards in uniforms either. Then she realized with horror that they wore prison colors, red, yellow, and aqua. "Convicts?"

Not just any convicts. As they approached, Rhonda pulled out her phaser and saw Cole do the same, although slowly. At the head of the group, the unmistakable gray gargoyle face of Tomar stretched into a repulsive grin.

Rhonda pulled the trigger, but the clumsy gloves made her miss her target, exploding the snow far from the mark. Cole looked barely able to stand on his legs. Would he faint? *Dear God, Not now!*

As Rhonda struggled to peel off her gloves so she could use her weapon effectively, the knowledge that Tomar was so resilient to phase fire, added to her nervousness. He also had numbers on his side. Rhonda counted nine convicts with stern determination on their humanoid faces.

The shape-shifter leapt and now stood only a meter away. "Could this be Captain Riggeur and his Alendresis bitch? What a happy coincidence!" Tomar's crooked smile revealed three sets of dagger-sharp fangs. "We have to stop meeting like this."

## Chapter Seventeen

### Frozen surface of Zurin Five

Cole's body had chosen a fine time to betray him. The damned energy pills had run out too soon. He peeled off his gloves with trembling hands then grasped his phaser and aimed at the shape-shifter. His fingers jittered so much, he had to grab the weapon with both hands in an attempt to steady it. Cole fired. The shot pulverized a protruding chunk of ice far beyond his target. The next shot missed again. Feeling useless in this weakened condition, he couldn't even hold on to the phaser that slipped from his clumsy fingers and fell to the snow without a sound.

Tomar laughed at Cole's unsuccessful attempts. His gang surrounded the shape-shifter and the two guards, forming a wide circle out of reach. Some convicts brandished sharpened pipes, ready to throw them like spears while others swung shorter makeshift weapons and blades in anticipation for the fight. One big burly man in red overalls even wielded a homemade axe.

Rhonda aimed her weapon at the shape-shifter. Why didn't she fire? Had the extreme temperatures affected the mechanism? Did her fingers cramp from the cold?

Tomar sprouted a whip-like tentacle that cracked and snatched the phaser from her grasp.

"You'll pay for this!" Rhonda yelled through the respirator, cradling her wounded hand.

Cole, behind her, felt light-headed. He shook uncontrollably and the adrenalin coursing through his spine didn't help enough. As he crouched to retrieve his phaser, he lost his balance and fell on his knee, effectively covering the weapon.

"Did you think you could escape a Monack?" Tomar's cold tone betrayed his rage. "I don't appreciate being left to die while you plan to escape on your ship." He motioned to the dark vessel, poised on the snow in full view of them all, only three hundred meters away. "We trapped the soldiers inside the Garrison, and now we'll kill you, too. This ship will be ours, and you are not invited to come along."

Apparently unaffected by the rare oxygen, the radical temperatures, or the low gravity, Tomar, unhindered by bulky gear, seemed to relish his obvious advantage. His mixed crew of over a dozen sturdy humanoids, each more repulsive and wicked than the next, also looked at home despite the harsh

conditions. Tomar had chosen his gang from the most adaptable races populating the prison. Nothing more dangerous than a smart convict.

Cole had to protect Rhonda. While Tomar focused on her, Cole discreetly retrieved the phaser on which he had fallen. Knowing he couldn't fire the weapon successfully, in a desperate maneuver, he rose and stumbled toward Tomar as if to rush him. Tomar sidestepped, letting Cole roll harmlessly in the snow.

The convicts surrounding them laughed heartily at the uneven contest. How could Rhonda possibly fight them all? So close to their goal and yet in such peril. Cole had to give Rhonda the phaser cradled in his hands before he dropped it again.

Pretending to blunder toward Tomar who sidestepped again as expected, Cole rolled and landed at Rhonda's feet. He handed her the phaser.

Rhonda snatched the weapon and fired in quick succession around the circle. Three convicts fell. Tomar stopped laughing and uttered a piercing screech that hurt Cole's ears even through the thick hood of his parka.

Still trembling, Cole fumbled with the hilt of the yataghan blade buried inside his uniform boot under the insulated footwear. The short sword seemed stuck inside, resisting his pull. Finally the blade came free just as the remaining convicts, rage on their hateful faces, yelled and charged the two guards. Tomar pounced on Rhonda.

Ignoring the pain that pulsed in his chest and the cold paralyzing his fingers, Cole rolled into Tomar's legs, slicing with the deadly yataghan. Tomar yelled and let go of Rhonda. Phase fire exploded and Cole saw one more convict fall, but Tomar had already recovered from the gash inflicted on his leg.

Rhonda now fought several assailants, but Cole had Tomar's attention.

Remembering that shape-shifters had no bones and were most vulnerable to slicing in many pieces, Cole wielded the yataghan blade in wide arcs all around him like a clumsy windmill. The effort almost made him faint, and he breathed heavily in his respirator. He didn't care whether or not he made it off the planet alive, but he desperately wanted Rhonda to survive.

Tomar's sharp claws swiped down and shredded Cole's insulated parka, letting frigid air inside his clothes, freezing his back. The next strike tore off Cole's respirator, and he felt the icy air scorching his lungs. The sudden brightness blinded him, and the lack of oxygen made him feel dizzy.

From the corner of his eye, Cole saw Rhonda fighting effectively with smart blocks and kicks that sent the convicts flying. She repelled the closest convicts and fired on more distant targets.

Remaining one step ahead of her attackers, she took advantage of the low gravity. She learned fast.

Just as the third swipe of Tomar's claws threatened to slash Cole in two, phase fire erupted from Rhonda's weapon and Tomar stumbled back, but he recovered with incredible speed and moved swiftly before Rhonda could fire again.

At that moment, the earth moved under Cole's feet. As he fell, he saw Rhonda and the convicts fall to the ice. Rhonda had lost her respirator and her phaser lay in the snow next to her. She breathed heavily. Wild locks escaped her hood, and bloody scrapes smudged her cheeks flushed by the effort.

The volcano rumbled and the loud vibration shaking the ice rippled through Cole's body. Taking heart in the fact that the quake allowed him and Rhonda to catch their breath, Cole gazed upon the waiting ship. So close...

The quake seemed to last forever as the ground kept moving up and down and side to side. Cole felt as if he rode a life-raft tumbled by a storm. Ten meters away, a wide crevice opened, like the one he'd almost fallen into earlier.

When the tremor finally subsided, Cole scrambled toward the gaping fissure, pretending to retreat from the fight. As expected, Tomar caught up with him and barred his way.

Cole vaguely heard a mournful cry in the distance. It sounded like some wounded animal, but he needed to focus on Tomar if his plan had any chance to succeed.

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Winded from lack of oxygen, lungs burning from the cold, Rhonda picked up her phaser and saw Cole stumbling away. The reckless man tried to distract Tomar to give her a fighting chance. Why did he have to be so noble? She loved him for it but hated to see him in such danger. Tomar would surely kill him. When she fired upon Tomar from a distance, the remaining convicts rushed her all at once.

Rhonda crouched and pulled the dagger out of her boot. She slashed with one hand. Unable to fire at such close range, she used the phaser as a metal fist. Under the onslaught, crowded by multiple assailants, Rhonda repelled and stabbed. Steel pipes clashed against blade and phaser.

When her dagger caught deep into one man's gut, Rhonda twisted then pulled out the blade. The wounded convict fell in a gushing of blood absorbed by the snow as fast as it flowed out. Still, four convicts remained fighting.

A guttural cry, more like that of an animal than of any humanoid, filled the air. But Rhonda knew of no big animals on the frozen planet, except maybe...

“Bearcats, ten o’clock!” Cole yelled in alarm.

The words brought a shiver to Rhonda’s spine. How could she ever have doubted the existence of the elusive bearcats? Terrified, she watched two shaggy monsters coming straight at them at unbelievable speed over the frozen surface. Larger than bears and swifter than cats, they had dagger-like fangs and three rows of bared teeth sharper than that of ancient crocodiles. God, she hoped she wouldn’t be their next meal.

“Don’t move, Rhonda!” Cole yelled. “They track motion.”

Rhonda stopped fighting, aghast at the spectacle. So did the convicts as they faced the new danger. Humanoids against beasts. Rhonda set her phaser on explode and fired at the bearcats, but the animals somehow sensed the attack and moved far apart, avoiding the discharge that blasted a large chunk of ice and snow between them in a shower of white powder.

From the upper slope, a snow bank destabilized by the explosion fell off, rolled the two furry creatures downhill and buried them under the avalanche. Elated, Rhonda hooted while the convicts shouted victory cries.

“Silence!” Tomar ordered, staring at the mound of snow.

As Rhonda followed his gaze, she watched in horror as the bearcats emerged through the mound, shaking the snow out of their fur. But even that incident didn’t slow them down. If anything, they moved faster as they barreled toward the group of men.

One convict yelled, brandished his spear and charged the beasts. He threw his weapon at the largest bearcat then ran away in a flurry of snow down the gentle slope. The bearcat swatted the missile aside, roared then chased after the spear man. The animal quickly caught up with him and pounced upon the unfortunate convict.

The spear man screamed under the beast’s claws, then his voice strangled in his throat. The bearcat dipped in to feed. Its muzzle came up bloody as the beast licked its fangs. A pink halo spread on the snow as it absorbed the blood pouring from the mangled body. But the second bearcat now approached the group of weary humans.

Tomar walked slowly toward the oncoming beast as if to confront the monster face to face. The bearcat stopped, sniffed around, and hesitated. Did it recognize the scent of another predator? Tomar shrieked a challenge, and the bearcat responded with a throaty bellow.

As the convicts, immobile for fear of getting butchered, stared at their leader in anticipation of the duel, Rhonda saw an opportunity. She moved slowly toward Cole and whispered. “Let’s make a run for the ship.”

Cole shook his head. "If we run, the male feeding over there will come after us."

Rhonda couldn't help notice the larger size of the beast. "But he's busy right now."

"It doesn't matter. It's instinct. They'll go after anything that moves."

As if on cue, the bearcat feasting on the downed spear man fifty meters away looked in their direction and groaned a warning. Blood dripped from the crimson fangs. Closer to them, Tomar and the other bearcat seemed involved in a slow ballet, face to face, studying each other like in a long-forgotten fighting ritual.

Rhonda couldn't stand the wait. "All right," she whispered. "What can we do? Shoot the convicts in the back?"

"Patience." Cole's gaze didn't stray from the two contenders. "Phase fire would attract the cats' attention, and we may need the convicts alive to fight the victor if Tomar loses."

The convicts yelled and cheered, encouraging the hissing Tomar. The Monack kept his shape but seemed to expand to match the bearcat's bulk and strength.

Rhonda didn't know who to root for. Both adversaries seemed equally dangerous and indestructible. Whoever won the fight, she felt doomed. "Let's hope these two kill each other."

Tomar seemed to be waiting for the bearcat to make the first move. The animal, weary, delayed the attack. But Tomar baited the cat, getting within range of the deadly claws.

The bearcat pounced, but Tomar sidestepped and stabbed the furry creature's flank with sword-like claws. As green blood seeped from the wound through the shaggy fur, the bearcat bellowed in pain and charged Tomar.

Picking up the discarded spear, Tomar shoved it across the bearcat's open mouth, preventing the beast from closing its jaws. Growing a single claw to the length of a very long sword, Tomar stabbed and pierced the roof of the animal's mouth. The claw penetrated deep into the soft palate, impaling the brain. The beast shook and quivered but still struggled to close its powerful jaws. Under the pressure, the metal pipe snapped and the bearcat's sharp teeth clapped shut, severing Tomar's extended claw.

As the animal collapsed in a weak cry, it kept the claw in its mouth. Tomar immediately shrunk and readjusted his shape, as if to compensate for the missing part of his body.

But the other bearcat had heard its mate's cry for help and rushed to her rescue. He sniffed the dying female lying in the snow then howled a sorrowful death wail. Tomar prudently kept the slain animal between him and the male beast. The monster turned to face the Monack and bellowed his rage, out for revenge.

"One down," Rhonda uttered, wondering whether the severed limb would impede Tomar, who

didn't look affected by the wound.

While guards and convicts stared in awe, the shape-shifting gargoyle and the second bearcat faced each other over the cadaver, circling one way then the other. The Bearcat swatted at Tomar but couldn't reach him over his dead mate. Tomar looked agile as he dodged the lethal claws slicing the air. Apparently, the Monack's previous mishap didn't impede his speed. Tomar kept challenging the bearcat, showing no fear despite its great size.

Finally, the bearcat leapt over his fallen mate and pounced on Tomar. The shape-shifter sidestepped and suddenly transformed into a bearcat, confusing the big male who stopped and sniffed, then roared his fury.

The ruse had only angered the beast further. Tomar regained his gargoyle appearance. Now infuriated, the bearcat, all fangs bared, snapped its jaws at Tomar's head, so close, Rhonda wondered how the shape-shifter kept avoiding the clapping teeth as sharp as scalpels.

In a swift motion, Tomar stabbed at the big head and punctured the beast's left eye. The bearcat howled in pain and reared up on its back legs, pawing the air blindly. Tomar, elongating his claw, slashed the bearcat's unprotected underbelly.

The beast's steaming guts spilled on the snow in a green mess and the nauseating smell arose despite the cold, making Rhonda want to heave. Tomar retreated just in time to avoid being smothered by the collapsing beast. The reverberation of the monster's fall shook the ice like the rumble of a quake.

Rhonda didn't know whether to be relieved or horrified. Now that Tomar had demonstrated the extent of his power, how could she possibly vanquish him?

The shape-shifter turned toward Rhonda, but Cole, who had discreetly moved away from the group to the side, now called him. "It's me you want, Tomar. Come and get me!"

Tomar stalked resolutely toward Cole and motioned to his men. "Get the bitch. I've got this one."

Rhonda couldn't let Cole sacrifice himself but as she started toward him, the three remaining convicts blocked her way and attacked. Rhonda kept them at bay with high kicks that propelled them far. She stabbed with her dagger but missed or over extended her reach, unaccustomed to the low gravity.

Trying to get closer, she gradually moved toward Cole, who wielded his curved blade in wild circles against Tomar. When she realized the depth of the nearby rift, however, Rhonda understood that Cole had a plan. The bottom of the fissure glowed with molten lava. Surely even a Monack could not survive a swim into that hot cauldron.

Retreating from the edge, Rhonda fired at Tomar and watched him stumble. Cole rushed him toward the rift, but the Monack recovered his balance. As a convict charged her, Rhonda grabbed his arm, braced herself and slung him in a wide circle above her head then aimed for Tomar and let go. The force of the throw, combined with the low gravity sent the convict crashing into the Monack like a bowling ball toward a single pin. Both Tomar and the convict stumbled and fell over the rim into the abyss in a deafening scream.

Rhonda raced to the edge to make sure Tomar had fallen all the way down. With horror, she saw the Monack change shape in mid air and grow wings to fly away from the inferno. The screams of the convict she'd used as a bowling ball still echoed and swelled as he plunged to his death.

Outraged, knowing that her phaser might not do the job against such a resilient shape-shifter, Rhonda switched her grip on her dagger and threw it with all her remaining strength. The sharp blade flew and ripped through the birdman's wing. Then Rhonda aimed and fired her phaser. The Monack screeched as his shape wavered and he spiraled inexorably toward the incandescent bottom of the deep crevice with a piercing screech. High on adrenalin, Rhonda kept firing until he hit the lake of fire. The screech ended as the Monack sizzled and disintegrated.

"Watch out," Cole yelled behind her.

Rhonda turned and saw Cole awkwardly deflecting a convict. The other one, the last of them, now came after Rhonda. Too close to fire, standing at the edge of the crevice, Rhonda dodged him, hoping he would fall to his death. The man's low-gravity skills, however, allowed him to keep his balance as he grabbed and wrestled her.

"Another bearcat!" Cole yelled.

Rhonda saw the huge shaggy creature bearing down on them. Anchoring herself on one foot, Rhonda kicked her opponent in the chest. The man went flying in the direction of the approaching bearcat. The beast pounced on the unfortunate convict and Rhonda heard his bones crunch.

As his adversary collapsed into a bloody heap, Cole grabbed Rhonda's arm and yelled, "Run!"



## Chapter Eighteen

Running in wide leaps in the direction of the ship, Rhonda struggled to keep her precarious low-gravity balance. Cole had let go of her. As she didn't hear him running next to her, she looked back and saw him lagging behind. "Cole! Hurry!" Was he trying to sacrifice himself again to give her a better chance?

Rhonda would not let that happen. When would the man understand that she valued his life? She backtracked to him and realized he was too exhausted to run.

"Go without me!" he ordered feebly.

"I didn't save your life back there to let you die now. You are coming with me." Although winded, Rhonda still had strength, and she estimated that Cole's weight in low gravity must be considerably less. "Climb on my back."

"What?"

"I can't run and keep my balance if I carry you in my arms. Climb on my back! Now!"

Cole shook his head and mumbled, "Stubborn." But he smiled and obliged her.

As she had guessed, Cole's added burden, instead of impeding her, gave her more weight to fight the bouncing effects of her running steps. Gasping for breath, heart pounding, she ran toward the spaceship. Behind her she could hear the snarls of the ravenous bearcat getting closer. Good God, it was chasing them! Panic gave her the strength to run faster.

She reached the ship and rushed up the ramp into the dark interior with her charge. She felt immensely relieved when the ramp came up behind her and closed. She could hear the bearcat's claws scraping against the metal hull.

Rhonda's legs grew very heavy. Rebel soldiers in green uniforms helped Cole climb down from her back. He collapsed on the floor under the sudden artificial gravity of the ship.

Rhonda needed to take care of Cole right now. "He fainted. Where is your infirmary?"

A young rebel grabbed Cole under the arms. "Take his feet and we'll carry him there."

Once in the small infirmary, the young man set Cole on a bunk and removed his belt and his torn parka. "Wouldn't be right to put him in the brig in his condition. We'll just stand guard outside the infirmary. Don't try anything funny, though, or he'll end up in the brig, sick or not."

“Right.” Rhonda remembered Princess Zarah’s conditions. Although on the same side, the Captain traveled as her captive. “May I stay with him? I’m a medic and he needs care.”

“Sure. But if you stay, you become a prisoner for the duration as well. It means total isolation. No contact with anyone at all.”

“Who else from the Garrison made it to the ship?”

The young soldier pursed his lips. “Sorry. I’m not allowed to tell you that.”

“They were my friends. I just want to know if they are safe.”

The rebel looked away.

Rhonda realized he wouldn’t talk. “Can you at least tell me how long we’ll be locked up in here?”

“About a standard month to where we drop you off.” He cleared his voice. “Something else. No weapons or communication devices of any kind allowed.”

Unstrapping her phaser belt, Rhonda gladly handed it out to the young rebel. “When are we leaving?” She peeled off her bulky parka and gave it to him as well.

An overhead message answered the question. “Everyone prepare for immediate lift off.”

The young rebel took her parka, nodded and left. As the door opened for him, Rhonda saw two armed soldiers standing guard in the hallway.

Hoping the soldiers outside the door couldn’t hear, Rhonda tapped her com implant at the base of her neck and whispered. “This is Rhonda. The Captain and I are aboard the ship in friendly but tight custody. Answer me if you are able. Let us know you are safe!”

Only static answered. Obviously the device didn’t work. Princess Zarah and her accomplices had thought of everything.

The vibration of the engines felt like a balm to Rhonda’s frazzled psyche. She wouldn’t feel safe until they were as far from Zurin Five as possible. Forcing herself to relax, she checked Cole’s vital signs. Weak but regular. She scanned his upper right chest for vessel damage and felt glad to find none. With a lot of rest, he would be fine.

She gave him a dose of stimulant from an injection gun. Within seconds, Cole opened his eyes with surprise, scanning his surrounding.

“We made it to the ship. How are you feeling?”

A sudden jolt shook the small space and glass bottles and medical packs fell from an open shelf. Rhonda gripped the bulkhead for balance as she remained standing next to the bunk bed. “Rather bumpy liftoff.”

Cole sat up and took her offered hand to anchor himself. They stared out through the wide oval porthole. The ship was lifting off at an odd angle. Soon it tilted then plummeted toward the planet.

“Dear God, we are going to crash!” Rhonda dropped on the bunk bed next to Cole.

He squeezed her shoulder and kissed her cheek gently. “As I said before, at least we’ll die together.”

Rhonda didn’t try to dam the hot tears that ran down her cheeks. God, she wanted to live, have a future, a chance at happiness.

The ship’s wild fall suddenly stopped within a few meters of the ice. A high jet of lava surged, so close to the porthole Rhonda thought it would hit and melt the window or pierce the hull. Then the vessel righted itself. When the vibration of the engines increased, the ship lifted quickly toward the stratosphere.

Overwhelmed by relief, Rhonda collapsed into Cole’s arms. She sobbed against his chest, unable to control her reaction. She had pushed her body to the limits of exhaustion and as she let go of the tension, she felt weak and tired.

Cole brushed her hair away from her face. “Do we know who else among the Garrison guards is on board?”

Rhonda shook her head weakly. “They won’t tell us, for fear we’ll try to organize a mutiny.” She scoffed. “As if we cared.” She wiped her eyes, then, retrieving the injection gun she gave herself a dose of stimulant as well. It made her feel instantly stronger.

Through the porthole, Rhonda could now see Zurin Five in its entirety. Still white in places, the planet now featured large bodies of dark water and fiery volcanoes that spat incandescent lava and clouds of black smoke. Slowly, the doomed planet diminished in size as they flew farther into space. From a greater distance, it looked like a fiery ball.

Rhonda thought of all the prisoners who must be dying right now. Some probably deserved their fate, but she also remembered her sister. How many inmates, who’d only trusted the wrong person, now met an unfair death? *Dear God, save their souls.*

Suddenly the planet seemed to expand and retract. Optical illusion? “Did you see that?”

Cole nodded. “Here it is again. We made it just in time.”

A victorious message blared overhead. “We have officially reached safe space.”

But Rhonda kept staring at Zurin Five. The planet seemed on fire. It changed shape as if it was melting, expanding in places, shrinking in others. Soon, it glowed like a small sun and flared brightly.

Fascinated by the spectacle, awed by the enormity of what Duran had done with its greedy

mining, Rhonda watched as the planet exploded, filling the black space around it with millions of incandescent pieces. It would have been beautiful to watch if it hadn't cost a hundred thousand lives.

"And to think that Duran expected us to die on that rock!" The thought made Rhonda so angry.

"I feel like such a fool!" Cole said with unexpected fury. "To think that I trusted a bunch of corporate bastards who lie, cheat, torture, and think loyal employees are expendable."

"Good thing they don't know we survived. If they did, they'd want us dead. We'd make embarrassing witnesses in a trial." Not that Rhonda intended to sue. She didn't.

"It might be good to disappear for a while." Cole smiled devilishly. "Know of a good place?"

Rhonda smiled back. "I was on my way to Banoi. You might find a new vocation there."

"Right. I didn't make a very good prison Captain." Cole leaned back against the bulkhead. "I broke all the rules, let prisoners escape, and accepted their hospitality to save my skin. My career is finished."

"You also saved the lives of at least another guard, and probably many more." She lay against the bulkhead next to him. "Don't be so hard on yourself. You did your very best, as always."

"What does your planet look like?"

"Much better than this one." Rhonda laughed nervously then realized how inappropriate that was. "Sorry, I didn't mean to make such a bad joke. Sometimes in overwhelming situations I react in strange ways."

"Everyone does." He took her hand. "Tell me about Banoi. I want to know everything."

"That will take time." She liked his line of questioning.

"We have a whole month to spend in confinement. I'd say we have plenty of time."

"Sorry." Rhonda shrugged. "That's the deal we made with Princess Zarah. Still a small price to pay for both our lives."

"Don't be sorry. You are the one who told me I should lighten up." Cole raised an eyebrow. "On the contrary, I should thank Zarah for this opportunity. I have a feeling we'll find a number of entertaining things to do together to pass the time."

"Oh you think so?" She edged her body closer to his.

Cole encircled her waist in a tight fit. "I want to learn all about you."

"I have a few more questions of my own."

"Like how many children should we have?" He bent over her so close, she could feel his breath on her lips.

Rhonda wanted his kiss. She'd missed the Cole she'd discovered that night in that other

infirmary on Level Sixteen, and she rejoiced at his return. “You’re not going to turn all cold on me again, are you?”

“Never again. Now we are safe, I don’t need to deny my feelings to make sure I can think clearly.”

When their lips touched, she opened hers to savor his kiss, happy to be alive, and grateful to have found him. “I’m glad we are going home together,” she said then kissed him again.

**The End**