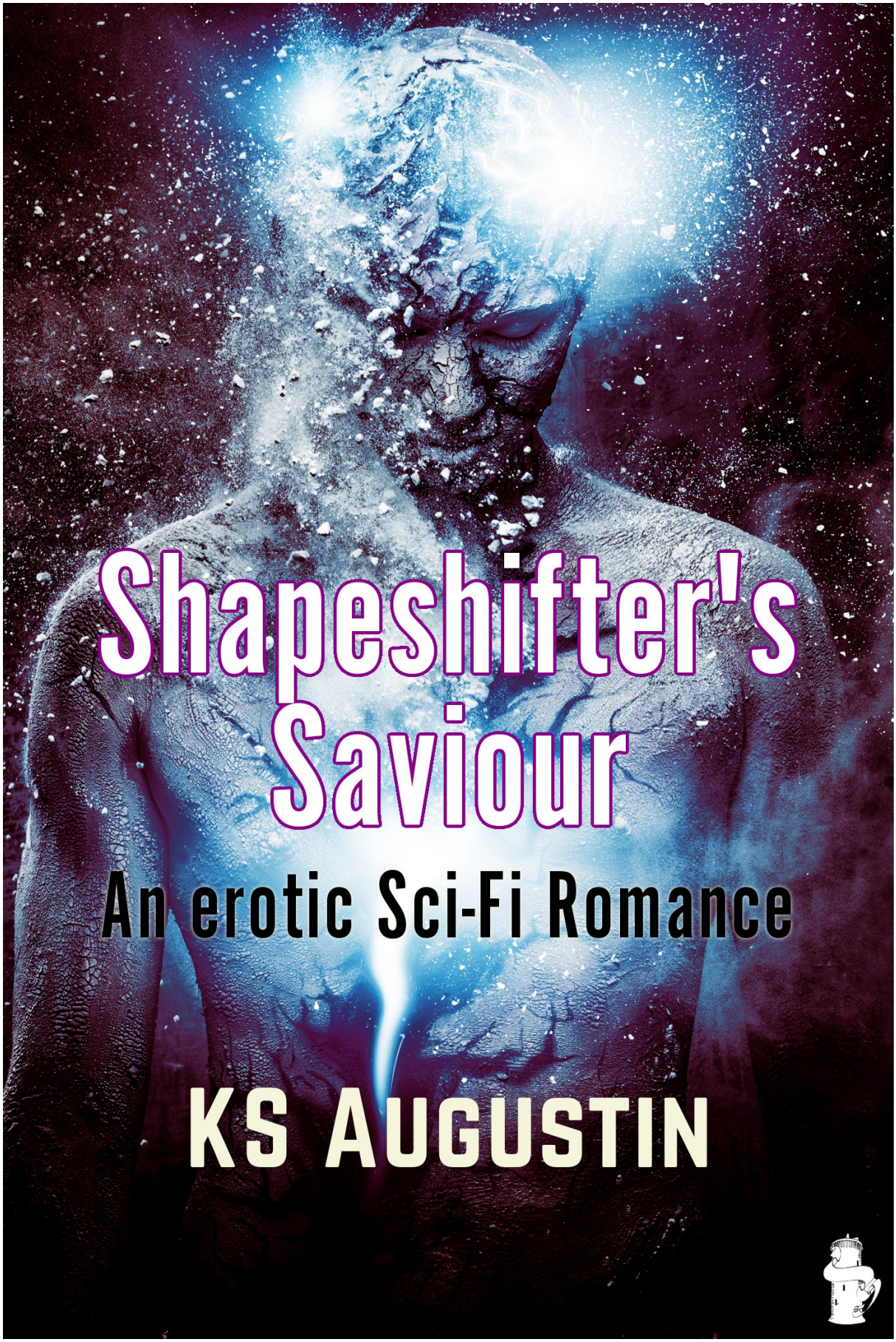

Shapeshifter's Saviour

An erotic Sci-Fi Romance

KS AUGUSTIN

Hoara Felin has fallen in love with a man who is forbidden to leave the planet. Plus, he's not quite a man…

Junior Commander Hoara Felin of the Republic's Space Fleet has problems. Her ship is inoperable and her shipmates are dead. The only thing that can make a bad situation worse is finding she has crashed on the notorious prison-planet of Bliss—a place where condemned criminals are sent…but never leave.

She finds an unexpected ally in Toh, a caring man who treats her injuries and hides her from those who would hold an officer of the Space Fleet for ransom. But, as Hoara is about to find out, Toh is keeping a terrifying secret of his own.

2016 update: This book, previously titled ON BLISS, has been re-edited and contains a compact list of people, places, and things.

Shapeshifter's Saviour

KS Augustin

People

Hanek – Hoara Felin – Sim – Timon – Drue Jeen – Old B'nen – Lanstrum – Shapeshifter – Dae - Jaynex

Places

Snaggle Teeth – Cleaner's Rock – Regulation – Bliss – Northern Waste - Justice

Things

Odyssey – Patience – ocho berry – slangtik – Ramtesh Eagle - Zephyr

Chapter One

The talk in the cabin of the shuttle *Odyssey* was tired but relaxed.

"Think we convinced anyone?" Hanek asked, his voice brighter than the current state of exhaustion warranted.

Hoara shot the young astronomics expert a smile. "That your theory of hyperspace accidents is due to the interaction between our propulsion systems and the universe's boundary?" She appeared to consider the question. "Hmm, probably not."

He looked crestfallen. "Why not? None of the other conference attendees appeared to come with anything more solid."

"The other attendees had one advantage you don't," Sim, the third member of the small group, remarked. She was more of a classic astrophysicist, currently taking on the *Odyssey's* navigation duties while they were away from their mother ship, a larger cruiser that did double-duty as a science vessel. "They can test their experiments in normal space. For yours, we need to enter hyperspace, and nobody can look at hyperspace. Well," she corrected, "nobody can look at hyperspace and remain sane."

Hoara Felin was their commander. She was no scientist. Instead, she had climbed to her current position through the military ranks. She frowned as she concentrated on the conversation, trying to comprehend the gist of what was being discussed.

"What about that Timon guy?" she asked. "Didn't he deliver a talk about developing some kind of filtering system so we could see into hyperspace?"

The other two, older Sim and younger Hanek, laughed.

"Timon's been attempting to construct his system for the past six years," Sim said, letting her in on the joke. "I swear, the only reason he comes to these conferences is to catch up with friends and exchange gossip."

"Speaking of gossip," Hanek sent a quick sideways flick towards his superior, "did you

hear about that Space Fleet captain? The one who let the terrorists get away?"

"Drue Jeen." Hoara's voice was chill.

Unfortunately, it didn't have the desired effect. Hanek shot her a grin of thanks and continued.

"Yeah, that's him. He was responsible for the death of a Special Counsel as well."

"I hear she was only demoted, not killed," Sim countered.

"The way I heard it, she bought a one-way ticket to the abyss." He straightened two fingers and pointed them to his forehead. "Laser rifle, straight to the head. I suppose you could call it a demotion."

The two scientists laughed again.

"You're not supposed to be discussing Captain Jeen," Hoara said. "That's a classified matter."

Hanek subsided in his chair, but Sim was made of sterner stuff. "He's not a captain anymore though, is he?" she remarked. "In fact, if they catch him, he'll be as demoted as that Special Counsel Hanek mentioned. Which means there's an empty slot a level above you, Commander." She shot her a meaningful glance.

It was a tempting fantasy. As much as Hoara liked her crew, it was mostly shepherding a bunch of scientists in roughly the same direction. Their mother ship, the *Patience*, resembled its name—a light cruiser that moved at its own steady pace. Her weapons weren't top-notch, her thrusters were a generation old.

Hoara sighed. What she could do in charge of a Raker-class vessel, for example, or in command of one of those special ultra-light pickets.

"You might find yourself trading in a bunch of old farts like us for an Enforcer-class ship," Sim prompted, "or even a fortress destroyer."

Hoara shook her head. "I'd need decades more experience than I currently have to even be second-in-command on a fortress," she said.

Sim was opening her mouth, obviously willing to argue the point, when the shuttle was violently wrenched sideways. Harness straps bit into Hoara's body.

"Gravity shear!" Sim yelled. She scrabbled at the console. "I'm picking up increased radiation vectors. We're headed into hyperspace!"

The word itself was enough to raise fear in every spacefaring human. There had been no mapped crease entrance on the charts, no warning of imminently entering a zone of chaos, only an unshielded glimpse of that which turned the average brain to mush.

Hoara shut her eyes. “Sim, bring down those shields.”

“I’m trying, Commander, but primary systems are unresponsive. Attempting to—”

The shaking of the ship smoothed immediately into a feeling of complete serenity that was even more terrifying.

A scream pierced the shuttle’s control room, the voice ragged and edged with hysteria. Were they travelling a hyperspace crease now? Hoara wondered. Was that Hanek’s voice? Had he seen the soul-bending transit of non-matter with his naked gaze? The temptation to open her eyes was intense; instead, she screwed them tighter shut.

Sobs broke out from the direction of the seat next to her. A kind of laughing gabble was coming from Sim’s position.

Damn everything to hell, did Sim get the shields down? How long did she have to sit there, physically and metaphorically blind?

The answering jolt was almost a relief, even if it meant a return of violent action. Hoara dared to open her eyes. The *Odyssey* was in an uncontrolled tumble, and both her crewmembers had somehow undone their harnesses. She saw pinwheeling limbs mixing with small, loose pieces of equipment, all of them careening in the air front of her. She saw the sharp edges of the control room machinery, the only steady objects in a somersault of organics and metal.

She had to focus, had to find a way to stabilise the craft.

Then the cabin exploded with heat. Hoara felt something hard and unyielding hit the side of her head…stars inside the ship…inside her head.

No, that can’t be right…

There was something covering her body. She moved and felt, not the micro-suede she was used to, but roughness against her arms. Deliberately steadying her breathing, Hoara

listened, and heard silence where there should have been the hums and understated chirps of the *Odyssey*.

She was also—she swallowed—thirsty. So very very thirsty.

Footsteps approached, clacking against a solid floor instead of the carpet she was used to. They sounded strange, a bit out of rhythm, but Hoara's head began pounding the moment she tried to think about their pecularity.

Then a hand settled upon her forehead, large and hot.

Hoara's military training kicked in. Opening her eyes, she threw off her blanket in one smooth move, capturing the hand with her right, while arrowing for her enemy's throat with her left….

At least, that's what *should* have happened. Instead, she got as far as a feeble tangling with the blanket that covered her, before needles of sharp pain riddled her body.

"Please try to relax," an accented voice told her.

She blinked a few times, attempting to pull her surroundings into focus. A man's features swam into view. His features were regular. Forgettable. He had tanned skin, brown eyes and chestnut hair, cut short. But his shoulders looked broad and his arms were well-muscled beneath the close-fitting material of his short-sleeved shirt.

"You've been in an accident," he said, his tone soothing as if speaking to a child. "I carried out some basic treatment but your burns are still healing. It will take at least another day before you can get up."

She noticed his lips as he spoke. They were soft and generous.

"How long…?" She stopped. Was that her voice? That creaky whispery thing?

"Two days. Your ship landed far out on the Northern Waste. It's very bleak and desolate out there. You're lucky to be alive."

The phrase—lucky to be alive—spurred other thoughts in her head.

"Hanek? Sim?"

Please don't let them be dead…please don't let them be dead…

"I'm not familiar," he paused. "If you are referring to the others in your ship, I'm afraid they're dead. I found two bodies. You were the only survivor."

Hoara turned away, at least she could manage that much, and closed her eyes. Who exactly was this man and was he telling her the truth? But she remembered the acrid smell of relays frying, the hair-raising hysteria of Hanek's screams, unharnessed bodies spinning through the cabin. In truth, it was more of a surprise that she had survived.

When she turned back, the man was still there, watching her. She searched his face, looking for some sign of deception, but didn't find any.

So. One ship damaged, two crew dead. No, not crew. Despite their divergent backgrounds, Hoara wouldn't have been embarrassed to call them friends. Hanek had been the younger of the two, serious yet subtly flirtatious. Cocky and personable, he'd done a good impression of pursuing her ever since he came onboard a year ago. He hadn't caught her… and now he never would. Sim, the enthusiastic older scientist and mentor, was always getting carried away with her equations and experiment results. It wasn't unheard of for her to skip several meals when she was hot on the trail of some esoteric model of the universe. No more.

A single tear trickled down her cheek. "Where am…?"

"You're safe. That's all you need to know for now." He fumbled for something on a small table beside her bed. It sounded heavy. "I'm going to give you a sedative." His voice became firmer, as if anticipating her objections. "You need to sleep. The dermal generation medicine I gave you works best if you're fully resting."

He swept part of her blanket down, reaching for her upper arm, and it was only at that moment that she realised that she was naked under the covering. She should have cared about it, but was too weak, and his touch soothed her with its gentleness. Something hissed against her arm.

"Am I…at least tell me if I'm still in Republic space."

He paused and nodded. "You're still in the Republic."

Her eyelids fluttered shut.

"But you'll also need to be up and about as soon as possible," he added, under his breath.

Hoara knew she shouldn't have heard those words. She wanted to ask him—why is it so important for me to heal quickly? Where exactly am I? Who are you?—but he had moved too quickly for her addled brain. She was sinking once more into unconsciousness. She hadn't even asked him for a drink…then she was gone.

Toh stripped as he left the room, folding the clothes neatly and storing them in a closet before heading for the kitchen, naked. His makeshift sensor system told him he didn't have much time, and he needed to be calm and ready for them when they arrived. They must be getting lazy with age, he thought with a flash of humour. Five years ago, they would have been pounding on his door the very night the spaceship crashed, full of nervous bravado. Maybe they were finally starting to ignore him, which could only be a good thing.

Rescuing the woman, however, was a risky move. It might arouse old prejudices and scorn. They might start noticing him again.

He blamed his insomnia. If he hadn't been awake and doing some idle skywatching after midnight, he wouldn't have seen the meteor-that-was-no-meteor streak northwards.

Insomnia plus boredom plus curiosity.

His first thought was that it must be a natural projectile, perhaps containing valuable iron ore, but the scans as he approached the crash location in his rickety flitter confirmed that this was no space rock. Salvage was his second thought as he picked up the automated distress signal before it, too, was suddenly terminated. As he crested the jagged peaks of what were commonly referred to as the Snaggle Teeth, he saw why.

A deep furrow had ploughed through the ground, terminating at Cleaner's Rock, a tor that stood proud, almost at the very centre of what had been an ancient volcanic crater. Coaxing his flitter to increase speed, he had circled the tangle of metal and debris that exploded out from the Rock. The beacon had obviously survived the initial collision but something had happened afterwards to silence it. A short circuit? Damage to its power cell? Without closer examination Toh couldn't tell, then, as he caught sight of her, he couldn't think at all.

As a last-ditch effort at saving its crew, the ship must have ejected its occupants. She lay —limp, bruised and still strapped into a chair—eighty metres from the crash-site. He hurried over to her body, afraid that she was dead, and was relieved to see that she was still very much alive, although parts of her body were blistered, her uniform charred. With expert hands, Toh felt her limbs and ribcage but detected no broken bones, although there was an alarming swelling on the side of her head. Still, she had been unbelievably lucky.

He worked the stiff mechanism, finally managing to undo the harness clips, and carried her back to the flitter. With the idea of more survivors in mind, he scouted in a wider radius from the ruined ship but only found two other bodies. He hesitated. It was only right that he should give them a proper burial but Toh knew he wouldn't be the only visitor to the site. Reluctantly, he left the dead humans where they landed and, even thought she was the enemy, even though she would eventually call down destruction from the heavens on him, he got into the flitter next to her, and started the engines.

He glanced at her often as he flew, low and fast, retracing his trek across the Northern Waste. He hadn't seen a woman that beautiful in…decades. He touched her cheek gently with a long finger, afraid she would shatter into a million pieces in front of his eyes. From the dim illumination of his instruments, he noticed that her skin was a luscious chocolate, her hair raven-black and wavy, her lips a perfect generous bow. He lost time and concentration as he watched her—wondering about the colour of her eyes, the sound of her voice—before his brain kicked in, and he focused on getting back home as quickly as possible.

Now, two days after that furtive rescue mission, the first trial was upon him. He only wondered that it had taken this long.

Stopping at the sink, he stretched out his bronzed arms and slammed both hands on the metal, curving his fingers over the bowl's inner edge as he began the change. It was painful, excruciating, and he gritted his teeth as he concentrated on lengthening his bones and changing the shape of his skull.

The radar pinged ominously behind him, its soft blips of warning increasing in frequency.

He had never changed his form so quickly before, and the usual discomfort flowered into something more terrible, making every limb tremble and the lean muscles of his body bow and stretch like taut bands. Drops of blood and sweat appeared on his arms, chest and face. His body shook more violently and it was only the press of his palms against cold steel that kept him standing.

When it was finally over, he took a few deep breaths, not trusting himself to let go of the sink just yet. The dimensions of his dome shrank from its former—human—size and he stared down at the long pale fingers clenched beneath him.

How could humans stand being so small? So short? And how could such small beings be so full of hate?

The radar's call had now merged into a single drone, so he switched it off while hunting for the pale blue one-piece suit he normally wore. He took care to wipe the blood from him, the sink and the kitchen floor before donning his attire, finishing with a pair of scuffed and patched dark boots.

When he emerged from his habitat, deliberately shutting and locking the door behind him, he was calm.

A breeze blew against his face as he watched a small cloud of red dust approach. It was still too far away for him to make out individual vehicles, but he was sure the leader of the group heading his way was Old B'nen, and Old B'nen never travelled with less than six accompanying toadies.

It wouldn't be good if they knew he was waiting for them. As stupid as they were, that would tip them off that he might have something useful in his domed hut, such as working sensor technology. Turning his back on the approaching vehicles, Toh headed for a lean-to that jutted out from the half-dome and to the old flitter inside. Until two nights ago, that banged up vehicle had been the most valuable thing in his possession.

He hadn't built any of the structures on the property. Originally, the dry piece of land had belonged to Lanstrum, a biofuel recycler who had hired Toh as his regular help. It hadn't been an act of charity, but one of pragmatism. People like Toh were stronger than the average human. They slept less. They complained less too.

Toh had worked for Lanstrum for thirty-four years. When the old man had died, Toh wordlessly took over his duties, his home…and his hidden sensor system. Lanstrum had been a hard and cruel man but he had also been a gifted tinkerer, and Toh was never more grateful for his employer's technological gifts than he was at that moment.

Deliberately ignoring the signs of approaching visitors, he approached the patched and dented vehicle. Its full canopy had been destroyed decades earlier and was now cut down to serve as a windshield. The instrument covers were cracked, dusty orange in the seams, where dirt had wormed its way into the panels. The upholstery ripped and stained. Toh tapped the fuel gauge but it still sat stubbornly at zero.

Set further back from the dome and garage was a shed that housed what had been Lanstrum's work, and was now his. People had been happy to buy biofuel from Lanstrum. He had been curt and paranoid, but he had been human. When Toh had taken over the business, he thought nobody would care about the change in ownership. After all, *he* had

been the one turning waste into fuel for the last twenty years of Lanstrum's life, not the man who had been convicted of killing a group of Security Force enforcers. But, to his dismay, it *had* mattered. People who were apparently happy dealing with a mass murderer snubbed him, and the biofuel operation had lapsed from one of steady to now only occasional production.

Not only had Toh used up all the fuel in his tank on his dash across the Northern Waste, there were no barrels in the shed that contained any reserves. They were all empty. He needed fuel to make fuel and was now reduced to making the trek to the town of Regulation on foot, towing a half-working gravity sled across the hot, rocky terrain for six hours before he reached his destination, where he would stop at every business, hoping they would be willing to sell him their discarded barrels of organic waste.

Most other recyclers got their waste for free. The kind of businesses that generated enough to make a recyler's job worthwhile saw it as a welcome service. The small inns, pubs, eating houses and entertainment establishments needed their waste products taken away on a regular basis, and the recyclers were happy to oblige.

Except for Toh. The businesses always charged him for taking away their barrels of unwanted sludge because of who—and what—he was. They either charged him or, if they knew he was coming, would arrange it so they could ostentatiously hand over the barrels, *gratis*, to a waiting and grinning *human* recycler. And he, in turn, was always surprised by how they could be so consumed by malice and yet still manage to function.

They laughed and called him names while they helped load the waste onto someone else's sled. Sometimes, they even deliberately kicked the containers over, letting the thick, dark fluid soak into the dry sand in the dank alleys behind their places of business. He knew they wanted to see his face change expression, see him erupt into anger at their obvious taunting. He also knew they carried weapons, keeping them close, waiting—hoping—for him to give them the opportunity to unleash them. So he did nothing, said nothing, and just moved on until he finally sold his fuel, gathered enough waste to begin again, and headed for home.

Old B'nen was still a distance away. After checking his flitter's fuel gauge, Toh moved across the small compound to the shed. He took his time lifting covers off the crude equipment, calibrating it as best he could, and setting up the machinery for another fuel-manufacturing cycle. Inside the residential dome, his guest would be unconscious. And quiet. He had time to spare her the briefest of thoughts before a squad of vehicles roared into the

front of his property. Swirls of red swept up in a cloud, obscuring the garage, some of it carrying as far away as the shed.

Toh turned, as if noticing them for the first time, and walked over to meet them.

The entourage consisted of four vehicles of varying vintage. Three ran on wheels but the fourth, the grandest, ran on a cushion of air. There were two males on its bare top platform and, as the larger man dropped to the ground, the hovercraft bobbed before the driver switched it off and settled it to the ground in yet another cloud of dust.

Old B'nen was a broad and massive heavy-worlder. Over the decades, muscle had been overlaid by pillows of soft flab, but the crimelord could still crush a throat with little effort. He ruled the territory around Regulation with ruthlessness and no small amount of cunning. (Toh could only be grateful that the man lacked a formidable intellect.) His skin was leathery from years of exposure under the unrelenting sun and his face was permanently set in a squint. Toh didn't even know the proper colour of the man's eyes, half-hidden as they were under large overhanging eyebrows and puffed out cheeks.

"Shapeshifter," the old man greeted. The word held wariness and caution.

Toh just nodded.

"There was a bit of a commotion here a few nights ago. My boys and I were, ah, away on other business," there were a few sniggers behind him, "but we got here as soon as we could. We've been going around, talking to all the homesteaders in the region. Seems some kind of meteor crashed up north. Did you see it?"

"Yes."

The seven people around B'nen shifted, a couple of them moving to the flitter that rested under the scrap metal overhang. Clearly it was the wrong answer to give, but Toh needed to stick to the truth as much as possible if he was going to save the woman in his house. He kept his gaze on the old man.

"Did you go after it?" B'nen asked.

"I tried."

"The flitter's been up within the past week," a voice called out. Toh recognised it as belonging to Dae, B'nen's young mechanic.

"Found anything interesting, shapeshifter?" B'nen's voice was quiet, calm before a storm.

"I told you," Toh said, "I tried to get to the meteor. It might have contained some valuable iron ore."

"Tried? Does that mean you didn't succeed?"

Toh nodded.

"Why not?"

"Ran out of fuel."

B'nen looked beyond him, to where Dae must have nodded.

"Seems a bit strange, chasing after a meteor when you're so low on fuel."

"It was farther away than I thought. Was it iron?" he asked. "Did you salvage it?"

B'nen regarded him silently for a long moment, then seemed to come to some conclusion. "It wasn't a meteor."

Toh said nothing. He waited for the inevitable answer, making sure his own response sounded plausible.

"It was a ship, probably no bigger than a scout."

"That's impossible. There are automatic defence systems ringing this planet. Any unauthorised vessel would get shot down."

That was the prevailing wisdom and he was happy to repeat it.

"It was a ship," B'nen repeated, his voice louder. "One of our radios picked up a distress signal before it impacted." Silence. "So I'm asking you again, shapeshifter. You sure you didn't reach it?"

"There are track marks where I ran out of fuel and had to drag the flitter back." Which was true…as far as it went. Toh had depleted a fair amount of his reserves circling the site when he first approached it. As a result, he ran out of fuel on the way home, six kilometres from his habitat. He guessed that the drag marks his flitter had left in the ground would still be visible, if B'nen was interested in investigating his story.

"I sent a team out the day after the crash," B'nen said. "They told me about the vessel. They reckon it belongs to the Space Fleet. Two crew dead."

"Then what's the problem?" Toh asked.

"There was a third person. We found tracks. That person's gone."

All attention was on Toh now, eight gazes watching him intently.

"It would be useful to find that third crewmember," B'nen said. "I think he'd make a good hostage. If he's alive, we could ransom him for supplies and some technology."

Toh remained quiet. He heard Dae banging around in the shed, probably searching for barrels of fuel. He wouldn't find any.

B'nen nodded at Toh's makeshift garage. "If you knew anything about this third crewmember… Well, you could get yourself a new flitter. Give yourself a more comfortable ride."

Toh wanted to tell him that it was impossible. The Republic never sent them technology. They were happy just to send the dregs of their society to where they could be forgotten. But he didn't want to open up another topic of discussion. He wanted to stick to one issue, answer their questions, and watch them leave.

"I don't have him," he said.

B'nen still stood there, as stolid as a boulder. "A Space Fleet ship," he mused, watching Toh with sharp eyes. "With Space Fleet officers, no doubt. Weren't they the ones who hunted you down and shipped you to this planet, half a century ago?" He paused. "If somebody had done that to me, I wouldn't be feeling too charitable. Even if you did decide to help, maybe give in to a moment of weakness, what good would it do, shifter? Help 'em, and they'll still kill you for it."

"I don't have him."

"Then you won't mind if I send my boys in to search your dome."

There was only one thing he could do. Without hesitation, Toh stepped to one side, and gestured to his front door. He calculated the odds. It would take them some time to break through the lock. Say, three of them to work on the door, maybe with B'nen supervising. That left three. He could take on perhaps two at a time but if at least one of them had a weapon….

The tense silence was broken only by the sound of the wind beating at the leather flap adorning the garage. Toh willed his muscles to remain loose, his gaze alert. His focus remained on B'nen.

Finally the heavy-worlder grunted. "Let's go," he said to his crew.

They turned and walked back to their vehicles. Dae kicked dust towards him as he walked by.

"Are you thinking of going anywhere, shapeshifter?" the crimelord finally asked when he was back in his vehicle. The driver hadn't turned it on, and B'nen's voice boomed from the deflated hovercraft.

"As you saw," Toh said, "I'm out of fuel."

There was no need to tell them that he had squirrelled away a precious and hidden cache over the past four years. To keep up appearances, however, Toh knew he would need to make that arduous trek to Regulation sometime soon. B'nen was sharp enough to be watching for that.

"I've secured the crash site and we picked up the primary data core," B'nen told him. "If I don't find what I'm looking for, I'll be back."

They stood there for another frozen moment, the humans watching Toh intently, taking note of his bald, pale figure—almost three metres high—skinny limbs, large dark eyes and ghostly white skin.

Expressionless. Alien.

They enjoyed whipping sand into his face as they turned and headed back to Regulation.

Chapter Two

"So what is it you do here, Toh?"

Hoara cut through the savoury custard pastry with a fork and lifted a piece to her mouth. It wasn't the best food she had ever eaten, but it was passable. And at least she was alive to enjoy it. Next to her plate, a cool glass full of milky liquid helped quench her thirst. The sky outside the angled kitchen window was dark. She had slept more than a day after Toh's last sedative shot, waking only after the sun had set.

And she was ravenous.

As he offered her a huge slice of pastry, Toh told her that her hunger was a side-effect of the dermal generation treatment. Much to her surprise, she was close to finishing the slice. He had also given her a man's trousers and shirt to wear, explaining that her own uniform was too burnt and damaged to be reused.

His trousers and shirt. She felt the cotton against her skin, the material soft and faded from many washings. The trousers were loose around her waist, resting on her hips. She'd had to fold up the bottoms so the length was more comfortable. Her feet were bare but she didn't mind. Even though it was evening, the air inside the dome was still warm, and the smooth floor was cool against her soles.

"What do I do here?" he repeated. "I survive."

Across the table, he watched her with an intensity that reminded her of Hanek, and it made her feel unaccountably nervous. It wasn't that she was afraid of Toh—he had taken almost maternal care of her, anticipating her wishes, helping her to stand and dress—but there was something in his eyes. Something that reminded her of her tremulous teenage years, of nervous waits for arriving boyfriends and the heady anticipation of sweet drugging kisses.

"Survive?" She attempted a smile, encouraging him to talk. Up till now, he had only given simple responses to her questions, saying that she still needed to recover and he didn't

want to exhaust her. But she wanted to know more. She wanted to find out his line of work, what he was doing in such a desolate place. If he really was as caring as he appeared.

If he had a wife.

"Is it that bad here?" she asked.

"It can be."

"What is this place anyway? Is it some kind of research station?"

"In a way." He changed the subject abruptly. "How do you feel?"

She shrugged. "Fine. My body still aches a bit and my skin feels very tender."

"That's only to be expected. It will be a few more days before you are fully recovered. In the meantime, you should do as little as possible."

As a Junior Commander with the Republic Space Fleet, Hoara was well used to putting her feelings, her more "ladylike" sensibilities on hold, but there was something about the man sitting across from her that called to that distant, walled-off portion of her. Maybe it was because he was so gentle, in a galaxy of testosterone-driven males.

"You're coddling me," she teased, as she finished off the last piece of pastry.

"You're my patient. Under the circumstances, you deserve to be coddled."

The men she knew, albeit most of them from the Fleet, always wanted to dominate, to decide, to show her how boorishly take-charge they were. It was strange, and appealing, to be with someone who didn't care about impressing her. Except, by not doing it, he was. Idly, she wondered what his skin felt like under the material of his shirt.

"Would you like to take a walk?" he asked. "Outside?"

"That would be, wonderful."

He pushed his chair back with a scrape. "I'll, er, get you some footwear."

He moved very quickly, and it was funny watching him wrench cupboard doors open. It must be nervousness that was making him look as though he was unfamiliar with what was in his own dome.

"This is quite an old structure, isn't it?" she said, looking up at the curved, ivory ceiling. "I didn't think they made habitats like this anymore."

Toh came back to the table with two pairs of boots, one much larger than the other. "It's

an efficient shape," he said. "Good structural integrity." He offered her the smaller pair of boots. "Here."

Hoara slipped her feet into boots that were still many sizes too big, but if she shoved her feet forward, she could manage a clumsy walk. Toh took the larger pair and led her to the door next to the kitchen sink. He opened it, and beckoned her outside.

Strange to think that this was her first glimpse of where she had crashed. In the deepening dusk, she saw that the surrounding land was barren, with the dark outline of distant eroded peaks to the north. She took a deep breath. It might have been desolate, but the air was clean, with not a hint of the esters and acetones she was used to.

"I can understand why you like living at such a remote research station," she said, taking in a deep breath. "The air is so clear."

Her gaze moved up. "And not a cloud in the sky. How bright the stars look." She frowned and pointed with a finger. "Was that a satellite I just saw tumbling past?"

"We have an extensive satellite system here," he said.

"Ah, that's what I keep meaning to ask." She walked over to him, but tripped over. Strong arms caught her, hesitated, then pulled her close. Hoara was unaccountably glad of the support. She leaned into him. "What's the name of this planet again? I command a crew mostly made up of scientists, you know, but I still don't know a fraction of our research stations."

"It's a small, pilot project. Classified."

Secret, eh? Well, she knew all about those.

"Did you contact the Fleet?" she asked, turning around. "I really need to get in touch, tell them there's a gravity shear out near—"

His lips, hot and feverish, met hers, stopping the words in her throat. Cradling her as if she was a precious piece of glass, he delivered a series of feather-light touches on her mouth. It was quick and gentle, and not at all what Hoara wanted. With fierce determination, she looped her arms around his neck, forced his head down and kissed him more thoroughly. He seemed surprised, and she pushed her advantage by moving her mouth against him, sending her tongue to duel with his, moaning as his grip tightened.

When they finally broke apart, the concern on his face was clear. "Did I hurt you?"

"Hurt me?" She grinned. "How could a supernova of a kiss like that hurt me?"

"I don't—"

Her voice softened. "Call it a thank-you. For looking after me. For all you've done. I've probably taken you away from so much work. I'll have to apologise to your supervisors."

"That won't be necessary," he said. "But I am a little more interested in how you express your thanks."

And Hoara, obeying a compulsion stronger than reason, was more than happy to show him.

He was a liar, no better than humans.

Toh banged through the shed, wanting to break all of Lanstrum's old machinery, to reduce everything to rusty flakes.

Why did he rescue her? Why not leave her to B'nen and his men? Why get involved at all? After fifty-three years on Bliss, he had finally found a measure of peace and what was he doing with it, but throwing it away. And not only was he throwing it away, but he was also doing it using lies and deception.

The day had dawned, hot and dry, but who was he fooling? The days always dawned hot and dry, then got progressively worse.

Deliberately slowing his steps, Toh paced from one end of the shed to the other, this time checking the machinery rather than wanting to destroy it.

As he saw it, he had a choice. He could either make the trip to Regulation, knowing that B'nen was watching his movements, or not. What did it mean, that second option? He pretended to mull it over, but knew well enough where his thoughts were headed. If he didn't go into Regulation, B'nen's suspicions would be aroused. The crimelord would visit again, and this time a closed door wasn't going to be much of an impediment. He would find the human, and possibly also Lanstrum's sensor system. And Toh's life, whatever was left of it, would be destroyed.

He climbed up to a narrow platform that ran the length of the shed, checked the mixer array and sighed. The first chemical mixer, already standing idle for the past three months,

was beyond a quick repair. Its paddle had been made of inferior material, mostly metal scraps, that had now corroded beyond recognition. Constructing a new paddle would be difficult. Toh methodically went from tank to tank, checking the valves and paddles. Most would require major renovation within the year, if not outright replacement.

The thought that began with looming hardship and expenses ended with the crimelord.

What if Toh wasn't here when B'nen visited? What if he took the human and ran away? He couldn't leave the planet, but there were boats that plied the salty oceans between continents. Or maybe they could head south, again out of B'nen's territory, but overland this time? Would they be able to find sanctuary before the crimelord's gang caught up with them?

But that meant leaving his life at Regulation, and for what? What exactly did he expect in return from Hoara Felin? That was the problem. Toh didn't expect anything from her. All he wanted to do was give. And he didn't know why.

He sat on the edge of the platform and kicked a leg against one of the tanks. It replied with a low, morose clank.

If he was such a generous being, why hadn't he told her where she'd crashed? Why hadn't he shared his theory that her ship had been shot down by the planet's automatic defence systems after suddenly appearing in near proximity to the planet? That was the only supposition that made sense, except Toh didn't know how a Space Fleet scout had been able to approach so closely in the first place. There should have been warning beacons, patrols, sweep teams ringing the system and beyond, to stop such incursions occurring.

It may be true that he was keeping a secret, perhaps more than one, he admitted, but so was Hoara Felin.

His mind almost made up, Toh clambered back down the ladder again. Although Lanstrum had been quick to exploit Toh's strength, he had still been a deeply prejudiced man when it came to the alien's true form. While Toh was out of his sight, he didn't mind if the work was done by a tall, white-skinned humanoid but, once Toh appeared anywhere near him, Lanstrum was inflexible—Toh had to transform into a human. It was the only way, Lanstrum told him, he could bear to be around him without wanting to blow his alien brains across the compound. By now, Toh was used to slowly segueing from one form to the other, and for keeping the human form for an extended period.

And wasn't that just another lie?

He walked back to the dome, kicking up dust as he walked, and opened the kitchen

door. To his surprise, his patient was on her feet. Startled brown eyes met his and she smiled sheepishly.

"I know I should be resting," she said, pre-empting his objection, "but I was starting to feel much better, so I decided to take a look around. This place doesn't offer much in the way of luxuries, does it?"

"We're in a remote spot."

"I meant to ask earlier. I mean, I know you answered my question but I was wondering…you see, Hanek and Sim—"

"The other two from your ship?"

"Yes. Would it be possible to visit their graves?"

Toh hesitated. "No," he said, more firmly than he intended.

He could tell by her sudden twitch that she was surprised by his vehemence, but what was he supposed to say? I don't know where your crewmates are because I deliberately left them out in the open to be found? To throw Old B'nen off track?

"I…" he was flustered, groping for words, trying to sound reasonable, "there are animals out here. I dug the graves as best I could but sometimes…it's not a pretty sight."

He had heard Lanstrum use that term a lot. Not a pretty sight. It must have still contained some human magic because he saw her relax. And was glad.

"Of course." She looked disappointed and the smile she aimed in his direction was sad. "When we join the Fleet, we know it's an occupational hazard."

Toh shook his head. "I don't understand."

"Well, you've got a choice, you see." She blinked her eyes rapidly, and he looked around, wondering if an open window had blown dust into the dome. "You can get disintegrated by an enemy ship, for example. In that case, there's only the ship's manifest to say you were onboard. If your ship is damaged, you can get sucked out, run out of oxygen and die of decompression. Your life support systems can fail. You," she paused and swallowed, "you can crash-land on a remote planet and lose two friends."

This was none of his business. The death of humans should not bother him, yet he found himself saying, "I'm sure they're still safely buried. The sun is hot on this world, and it will keep them warm in their final resting place."

He felt something stir within him when she smiled her gratitude. He remembered the feel of her skin against his hands when he was tending her. A rush of desire filled his head, making him feel dizzy.

No!

He had to retain control. He moved forward, couldn't help himself stretching his hand to touch her arm. A part of him said he was only doing that because she still wasn't fully recovered. Unfortunately, the rest of him didn't believe it.

"You should go back to bed. You need more rest."

Maybe it was her pheromones, a female scent that tickled his back-brain, bypassing all rationality. Now that he had made his decision to remain with her, keep her safe, he was starting to notice all kinds of things. Her scent. The way her smooth chocolate skin glistened. The precise movements her long, capable fingers made as she ate. Thinking of her lips made him want to kiss them.

"Yes, of course." Her words interrupted his thoughts. "But I," she sounded embarrassed, "might need some help. I'm still feeling a little weak."

A lady in distress, Toh thought to himself. The Divine Creator couldn't have come up with a better way to initiate his fall into sin. And the fantasies he was having about the lovely Hoara Felin were definitely sins. He didn't need any of his old teachers around to tell him that much.

"Of course," he said.

He followed her back to what had been his bedroom. The blinds were drawn and the room was in semi-darkness. Her scent filled the small space. He tried not to inhale.

While she undid the buttons of her shirt, he started on her trousers.

He tried to recall astral charts in his mind while he unzipped and slowly pulled the trousers down to her ankles. Then he made a mistake. He couldn't help it. He had to breathe in. He breathed her in, and all the frustrated desires of past years, the slow trudging march of solitude and heartache, erupted in a sudden orchestra of movement.

Swiftly, as she stepped out of the pants, he threw them to one side. He was still crouched in front of her, and his first kiss was on her thigh. He heard her quick intake of air and ignored it, closing his eyes as he continued to kiss her legs, first one then the other. He would not think of rejection, nor of refusal. He would kiss her and pleasure her and perhaps

rouse in her the same kind of passion that she aroused in him.

He had never felt such silkiness before, such fragrant smoothness, like the skin of an ocho berry he remembered from long ago. He straightened slightly. His face brushed her groin, then kissed her abdomen, his hands gripping her from behind, pushing her hips against him. Her legs were almost together, but that didn't stop him. He moved back down, this time stopping at her triangle of curls, to the mound of her musky-scented sex, using his tongue to part her, letting it work its way between her outer lips to curl behind her clitoris. He exhaled—hot and steamy with his mouth open—before taking her nub between his lips.

Above him, she groaned and moved her legs further apart, clutching his hair with distracted hands.

"We…I…shouldn't," she gasped, but her body encouraged him to continue.

He sucked on her wetness. Extended his tongue, letting it slip along her labia. Concentrating, he formed small nodules on his organ and rubbed against her, before surging forward inside her. He had dreamt of doing this to a woman for so long. He thrust along her slick passage, feeling her muscles clench against him before he finally, reluctantly, withdrew.

"You were," she panted, "so deep…"

His voice was hoarse. "I want to be deeper."

He pushed her onto the bed, shifting her so her back was against the wall. She still had the shirt on, although its buttons were undone, and the glimpses of her breasts and erect nipples were more erotic than he thought possible. With gentle yet firm hands, he pushed her knees up then outwards.

Her perfume was intoxicating—so elemental, so primal—and he saw her cunt glisten with craving. An errant thought suggested that she might still be suffering discomfort from her injuries, but her wetness told him that she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

With a broad tongue, he lapped at her, a long wide stroke that sent a spasm through her body, then swallowed her musky sharpness. She was thick and slippery against his lips, against his tongue as he invaded her again, flicking the tip so she jerked with each move.

She was dripping now, a small patch of dark wetness pooling on the sheet. With his fingers, he pried her labia apart and kissed her clitoris, moving his lips as though they were against her mouth, grazing her with his tongue, playing, twirling, listening to the tenor of her breathing as it got more ragged, as she started to lose control.

Hoara screamed as she came, clenching fistfuls of the sheets in her hands and bucking her hips against his mouth. He moved his hands to keep her knees apart and continued flicking back and forth across her clitoris, delivering two, three more orgasms before he let her rest. Then he was out of his clothes and perched above her, moving her body so she rested back down on a pillow. He entered her. She was so wet, it took only one stroke.

She clutched at him while he paused, letting the head of his penis expand and form ripples along its shaft. Then, lifting her hips, he slammed into her, throwing his head back while he felt her clench and writhe against him.

No, it was too much…it had been too long…

It only took another dozen strokes before he was engulfed by his own climax, pumping himself into her with rhythmic spasms before he was released from his body's carnal urgency.

They were both breathing heavily and the air was thick with the aroma of their shared lust.

"I'm…sorry," he managed to say. How could he have lost control so easily? Especially to one who belonged to his persecutors?

But she just smiled. "Sexuality is nothing to be ashamed of," she said softly, her voice husky with satiation.

For humans perhaps. Not for him.

"You need to sleep," he told her in the darkness, stroking her. "You need to recover."

"I," she hesitated, then closed her eyes, nestling her head in the palm of his hand. Within minutes, she was asleep.

The next morning, Hoara woke and stretched her delightfully naked arms. She wasn't surprised that Toh wasn't in bed next to her. Even knowing him for as little time as she did, she knew he was a disciplined and industrious man. Well, maybe not so disciplined. Her mouth curved at the recollection of the night before.

She walked to the room's small bathroom, splashing water on her face and finger-

combing her hair before dressing and heading for the kitchen.

There was a different atmosphere in the dome. Somehow, the air of rest and calm had disappeared. The back door banged and she entered the kitchen to see an open cloth pack on the table, and Toh caught in obvious indecision, flicking between the pack and the open cupboard.

"Good morning," she said.

He started, as if not expecting to see her, then smiled lopsidedly. "Good morning."

She inclined her head at the pack. "Are you going somewhere?"

Something about the scene didn't seem right. Suspicions, honed by years of Space Fleet training, took form in her head.

"I got a call last night, after you went to sleep, from my, my superiors. They told me," he stopped and looked at the floor. "No, I can't do this. Please, sit down and I will try to explain."

He poured simmering coffee into a thin metal cup and placed it in front of her.

"We're leaving," he said. "Tonight."

She was confused. "Tonight?"

"We don't have very good sensor technology here. It's the best time to evade discovery."

"Discovery? I don't understand."

"Your ship was a Republic scout, was it not?" he asked.

She nodded.

"And you're an officer with the Fleet?"

"Yes." She wondered why he'd asked. Surely, her uniform would have told him as much.

"There are people looking for you."

Her expression brightened but he shook his head.

"No. They want you for ransom. To ransom you to the Republic."

She had to laugh at that. Maybe Toh's isolation had addled his brain. "I'm sorry, but

that doesn't make any sense. If we're still in the Republic, then it's a simple matter of travelling to the nearest administration centre and confirming to them who I am."

"There is no 'administration centre' here."

"That's impossible." She frowned and her tone sharpened. "We have representation on every Republic planet, except…"

She looked at him with dawning horror. He nodded.

"Welcome to Bliss."

Hoara was glad she was already sitting down, or she would have collapsed to the floor.

Bliss.

The Republic's notorious prison-planet, named by a sadist for sadists. The deportations to the world had begun long before Hoara was born and were still continuing. For its most heinous crimes, the Republic didn't believe in execution. Neither did it believe in rehabilitation. But it did believe in Hell. Those who had been convicted of crimes that warranted a punishment worse than a quick death were taken away from their home worlds and dumped on Bliss, to eke out a living however they could. Or they could die. The Republic didn't really care, one way or another.

"How did I get here?" she asked.

Toh turned his back on her to pour himself a coffee from the metal jug on the stove. Suddenly, the low level of technology that surrounded her started making sense.

"I'm hoping you can tell me that," he said. He brought his cup to the table and sat down. "There are automated weapons platforms orbiting the planet, warning beacons light-seconds out from the system. How did you get past them?"

"I," she hesitated, wondering if she could trust Toh. Then again, there was little in her tale that he could use to his advantage. "We were heading back to my ship from a conference," she told him, "when we hit a gravity shear."

"I thought those were mapped—"

"This one wasn't." Her voice was short. "It threw us into hyperspace. I don't know how far we travelled. When we re-entered normal space, I tried stabilising the craft but something happened. I lost consciousness." Her gaze met his. "Then you found me and brought me here."

Bliss. Criminals. Toh didn't look like a criminal, although Hoara knew that was a simplistic assumption. Some of the vilest killers in history looked as ordinary and reassuring as him. But, if he was a vile human being, why had he rescued her? Why was he protecting her? Why had he made love to her, ensuring her own enjoyment before he had taken his own? Surely a mass murderer would be more selfish? Unless he was the *descendant* of a criminal. That sounded probable.

"You must have been hit by one of our laser satellites," he said. "But that means there's a crease that exits right near Bliss."

She shook her head. "There isn't any such crease on our charts."

He nodded at the uncertainty in her voice. "I don't know what it means either."

But Hoara had more problems than an astrocartographic anomaly.

"You said someone wanted to ransom me."

"That's what he told me, although he is known to be elastic with the truth. You could well be sold instead."

"Sold? Who is this man? Who wants me?"

"His name is Old B'nen. He's the crimelord of this territory."

He must have noticed the look of incomprehension on her face.

"Bliss is a very dry planet," he said. "There are only two continents that almost completely encircle the world. We have one ocean. This dome is many hours' walk from the nearest town of Regulation, which is one of the few population centres of the Northern Waste."

"Northern Waste?"

"A cold-weather arid region. B'nen is king here. He shares the Waste with four other crimelords, and nothing happens in his territory without him knowing. When your ship crashed, he knew."

"But he didn't find me."

"No. That's because I was the first to reach your wreck. I discovered you and brought you here. Two days later, B'nen and his men came."

"To *this* dome?"

Toh nodded. “You were still unconscious in the bedroom. He asked me if I knew anything about the crash. I said yes, I saw it, but I didn’t have enough fuel to get to the crash site. Old B’nen is smart. He took your primary data core. He knew that there were three crewmembers in your scout. He knew that one was missing.”

“But didn’t you already tell him that there was nobody here?” She frowned. “Wasn’t he satisfied with your answer?”

“I am…not trusted by the crimelord. I think he will come back, and soon. We must be gone by then.”

“Where will we go?”

“We cannot travel across land. B’nen is friendly with the other crimelords, and they would hand us to him if they found us in their territory. If we head due west, we will be over the ocean. There is a small chain of islands. I don’t know if we can reach them but maybe, with some luck, we can. It is out of B’nen’s territory and sphere of influence. If we landed there, it could buy us some time.”

“That’s a lot of ifs.”

“It’s better than what awaits you if we stay here.”

Hoara thought about running. About safety. About being on Bliss.

“I have to get to my ship,” she finally said.

“Impossible.” He shook his head. “If they don’t find us here, that will be the first place they look. And the detour will eat up too much of my available fuel.”

Her voice was firm. “It’s not open to negotiation.”

The look he sent her revealed a trace of alarm, as if he hadn’t expected any dissent from her. Contrarily, it made her feel better than she had for days, as if she had finally managed to find a small foothold on a situation that was spiralling out of control.

“What are you suggesting?” she asked. “That we continue running, circling Bliss while we do so? That I remain on this planet?”

He remained silent.

“My ship contains a distress beacon.”

“Your distress beacon was destroyed when your ship hit the ground,” he said.

"There's a backup. And there may be a few other things I can salvage. Things that could help us."

She knew he was thinking it over, and thought he would refuse.

"We leave at nightfall," he said. "You have five minutes to get what you need."

She looked at him and her voice was full of relief. "Thank you."

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