

Dark Territory Objects at Rest

By DarkKush

Casting Stones

Rigel X
August 2376

The Saurian brandy dulled his senses, but not nearly enough. Lt. Commander Ivan Cherenkov lurched forward in his seat, motioning awkwardly for the bartender to refill his glass.

“Don’t you think you’ve had enough Friend?” A firm hand clasped his shoulder. Ivan shoved roughly out of the grasp, almost falling off his stool in his inebriated state.

“Wass it to you?” Cherenkov slurred as he turned around, his eyes squinting as he sought to refine the blur now undulating in front of him.

“I think the more important question might be why you are here again for the fifth night in a row,” the blob replied. The man’s voice was calm, controlled. Even through Ivan’s stupor he could feel a certainty radiating from the man, a sense of purpose he hadn’t felt in a long time...if ever.

The man stuck out his hand. Ivan didn’t take it until he came fully into focus. The man was human, middle-aged, with blandly gentle features. Except for his eyes, Ivan realized. They were as fiery as anything the barkeep had in stock. “My name is Pascal,” the man said, “Pascal Fullerton.” He extended his hand.

Ivan slowly took it. Fullerton’s grip was strong. “And what might your name be Friend?”

“I’m not your friend,” Cherenkov remarked gruffly, concentrating hard to keep from slurring his words.

“If that’s how you feel,” Fullerton nodded sagely, “but if it’s all the same...”

“Ivan,” Cherenkov grouched, not even sure why he even told the man his name,” Cherenkov.”

Fullerton nodded, his eyes brightening with remembrance. “Starfleet...you’re a Starfleet officer. I saw a report about you on FNS.”

Ivan’s cheeks reddened. He hated the fact that news of his incarceration has been blared all over known space by the Federation News Service. The way he saw it, he had bent the rules for the greater good, and stealing the *Defiant’s* cloaking device to rescue his captain had been the right thing to do, and it led to dismantling

the True Way in the process. As far as Ivan had been concerned, it had been a win-win for everyone, but Admiral Shanthi hadn't thought so. More importantly, his lover, Commander Aquiel Uhnari hadn't thought so either, especially after he had left her out of the mission on purpose. He had been trying to protect her.

Ivan had been well aware of Aquiel's shaky service record and he hadn't wanted to do anything that might endanger her career. She had worked hard to repair the missteps of her past, much harder than he had to correct his own mistakes.

The commander had been perfectly willing to torpedo his own career, but he would never do anything willfully to hurt the woman he loved. After leaving his home of Terra Nova for Starfleet Special Missions almost two decades ago, he had sworn that he would never be like his father, and protecting Aquiel's career was a part of that promise.

She knew little about his past on Nova, and she had mistaken his concern for a lack of trust in her, or her abilities. Ivan hadn't known how to explain away her fears, and she had turned away from him.

Right before he had been sent to Jaros II, at Shanthi's insistence, he proposed marriage to Aquiel, and she had rejected him. During his three months behind bars he had dreamed of the moment he could step onto the Promenade of Deep Space Nine, where Uhnari had been reassigned following the destruction of the *Aegis*, and reclaim her love and honor, much like the chivalrous knights of old whom his Aunt Raisa had been so enchanted with.

But Tai Donar, *Aegis's* former Security Chief and his brother-in-arms from Special Missions had informed him that Aquiel and Commander Jeffrey Thorpe, the incompetent that had lost the *Aegis*, had grown closer. Donar had learned about the possible romance from the Special Missions operative onboard DS9, Commander Curbeam.

Even though Ivan had been compelled to leave Special Missions, and Tai had decided to go with him, the fraternity among the operatives trumped politics or image and Cherenkov was grateful for that.

Despite what Tai had told him, Ivan had still been determined to go to DS9 and stake his claim. He wasn't a man that gave up easily, but en route to the space station he had found Rigel X, and drinks and doubt had dampened his ardor.

And he had remained in their possession for several days now. He had enough credits to draw not only the attentiveness of the barkeeps on several levels of the large trading complex, but also several courtesans.

Shamefully he had given in to his baser instincts and the week had become a continuum of excess, a wantonness he hadn't experienced since his days working in his father's employ for the Orion Syndicate. His last conquest had been Oiran, the Farian dancer gyrating on a stage in the center of the small, drafty bar.

Ivan had already made eye contact with her earlier, and after her shift was over the Farian would return to his hotel room. The woman was beautiful, as

had been the others, but none of them were Aquiel...and maybe that was the point. Cherenkov couldn't be sure. He wasn't in the best state of mind for profound insights.

Fullerton had stood calmly while Ivan woolgathered. Blinking, Cherenkov glared intensely at the man. "You're still here?"

"Yes," Fullerton replied. "Is this," he paused, sniffing with distaste as he glanced around, "really what you want? Is it really feeling the hole you feel inside?"

Cherenkov wanted to respond with a snappy or brutal retort, but he came up short. He did feel empty, and neither the booze nor women had done much to seal up his emptiness.

"I thought so," Fullerton said, but his tone wasn't boastful. It was contemplative, almost sad. He pulled a pamphlet out of one of the pockets on the heavy parka he wore. "When you are sober, I want you to read this."

Ivan took the proffered pamphlet, his eyes roving over the words printed on the cover, "The New Essential's Path," he muttered. "What kind of drivel is this?"

"Perhaps you should read it before you judge," Fullerton replied. "You might find what you're truly looking for, and I ensure you Commander Cherenkov that you won't find it in drink," he paused again, turning directly to the comely Oiran, "or flesh."

Ivan burned with shame. It was as if the man had read the lustful thoughts in his mind. Or, a more cynical, colder thought took hold, Fullerton had been following him. He had known that Cherenkov had been frequenting this place and there's no way he could've known that unless he had been tailing Ivan. "Who do you work for?" Ivan asked brusquely. "Shanthi won't be pleased until I'm totally driven from the Fleet is that it?"

Fullerton looked confused for a nanosecond, and then he chuckled. "I assure you that I'm not a member of Starfleet in any form or fashion. That organization has moved too far away from the principles that made it great, ideals that men like you are punished for upholding, things like honor and loyalty."

Ivan found himself nodding, in spite of himself. His loyalty to Captain Glover, the man who had given him a chance for a new life in Starfleet had been far more important than adhering to dusty Starfleet regulations. Cherenkov wasn't opposed to duty or discipline, but Special Missions allowed for more creative decision-making than Starfleet did, and the numerous regulations and protocols Ivan had found himself muddling through had been nearly unbearable.

"I know what it's like to fall on hard times," Fullerton said smiling, "and to be the guest of the Federation's rehabilitation system. That's why I decided to start fresh here. What better place is there to be a beacon of righteousness and moral fiber, precisely the things the Federation needs to pull out of the mire left behind by the Dominion War? In fact, if we had been made of sterner stuff the Dominion might've been less sanguine about invading the Alpha Quadrant in the first place."

Again, Cherenkov couldn't disagree. Special Missions, Starfleet Marines, and the other elite branches were dwarfed by the Exploratory Division. It was the true face of the Fleet and of the Federation for many alien worlds. And now that Cherenkov had been allowed to work in both cultures, he couldn't deny the distressing laxity regarding military preparedness on the part of the explorer wing. The potential to seek out new friends, instead of preparing for enemies, had left the Federation weak, and open to the predations of the Dominion, Klingons, Romulans, and others.

"You see I speak the truth?" Fullerton nodded. Ivan didn't respond. "I won't trouble you further, but I think you know in your heart that I am right. Please read the pamphlet, and if you find you would like to learn more about New Essentialism, the information inside will guide you to me." Fullerton smiled again, before stepping away, and then the man turned and walked out of the bar.

Cherenkov watched the swinging door for several seconds, his heart and mind in gridlock.

"Still want a drink Friend?" The Tarkanian bartender's voice cut through Ivan's confusion.

He turned around slowly. "You're not my friend," he said gruffly, "but I think I might've found someone who is." Sliding the pamphlet into the pocket of his coat, Cherenkov slid out of his seat, and into the frigid night, the truths he felt within the pages warming him against the cold without and within.

Unprotected Waters

Pacifica
August 2376

Jasmine

"You weren't kidding about this being paradise," Lt. Commander Pell Ojana breathlessly remarked the instant she materialized on the pearl-white beach. Lt. Jasmine Glover was already pulling off her boots. Pinching the tops of the black boots together in one hand, the lieutenant wiggled her brown toes into the soft sand.

She closed her eyes, savoring the sensation of the hot granules against her skin. It's been a long time, she realized with sadness. Beyond the beach, the cerulean waters lapped majestically. She was certain if she spent enough time gazing at the waves her childhood pet Makara would soon leap up in greeting. Her parents declared that she shared a telepathic bond with the bottlenose dolphin. Jasmine wasn't so sure of that, but she knew they shared a deep bond. Thanks to an aquatic translator designed by her grandfather, she had been able to develop a deep friendship with the mammal.

"Jasmine?" The voice reached her about the same time as the smell.

"Mami," Jasmine opened her eyes, smiling at the portly woman heading down the beach, a large dish latched between her hands. Savory chunks of Kalua pig wafted through the air. Jasmine wrinkled her nose. "You know I don't eat meat."

"Speak for yourself," Pell remarked, stepping forward. Jasmine's mother chuckled.

"I'm Dr. Ingrin Mendes," she said, her voice filled with the lilting timbre of her native Jamaica. Pell bowed.

"Pell Ojana, I served with your daughter on the *Aegis*." The Bajoran Diplomatic Officer said with mock solemnity.

"Oh, I know who you are," Dr. Mendes replied, holding the dish up to her chest. Pell gingerly took a piece of the steaming pinkish-brown meat between her forefingers and swallowed it quickly. Jasmine groaned.

Both Pell and her mother laughed. "Well, I'm glad you weren't with me and Dr. Amoros the last time we were at Deep Space Nine. If you think my dining tastes are atrocious, I've got nothing on a Grisellan."

"I don't need any details," Jasmine nodded vigorously. The Operations Officer still couldn't quite believe it, but she had become extremely close to the Bajoran during their incarceration on Jaros II. At first she had been wary to Pell's offers of friendship. Jasmine had been afraid that Pell was seeking out her confidence to merely advise her to reconsider her desire to separate from her husband Terrence.

Pell and Terrence went back a long way, and their relationship had first made Jasmine jealous until she realized that the friendship was platonic, though she was certain she could sense faint strands of attraction from both her husband and Pell.

But when Jasmine had decided to take a leave before being reassigned, she decided to ask Pell if she would like to go to Pacifica. The Bajoran had told her previously that she had never been to the famed water world. Jasmine really hadn't wanted to travel alone, but had been too afraid or prideful to admit that, so she had couched her offer as a chance for Pell to fulfill a dream, and the Diplomatic Officer had eagerly accepted.

Jasmine turned to glance at Pell. Before they had beamed down, Pell had been talking with Dr. Amoros, the *Aegis* Chief Medical Officer. Since the destruction of the *Aegis* shortly after most of the senior staff was locked up at Jaros II, Pell had been trying to track the whereabouts of the remaining crew. Jasmine hadn't quite warmed to her colleagues as well as Pell had. Her time on the *Aegis* had been a personal ordeal, as she struggled to do her duty while adjusting to working with her husband. "So, how is Dr. Amoros?"

"He's doing fine, though I'm a little worried that he's put off his hibernation cycle," Pell answered, a flash of concern fluttering across her face. The Grisellans were an ursine species that hibernated for close to six months annually. Amoros, being an elder, had learned how to cut that time down to almost half, but it was not advisable. "Even though he should know better," Pell added, "he has joined the crew of the medical ship *Kitasato*, assigned to Aaamazara."

The imminent geocide of Aaamazara, caused by a Dominion bio-weapon, had animated some of the best scientific and medical minds in the Federation and the entire Quadrant. Even the Dominion had sent several teams to try to undue the damage they had wrought, but so far none of the combined efforts had met with much success.

"I'm sure that Dr. Amoros knows what he's doing," Jasmine concluded. "Plus, I don't think he could live with himself, taking a long nap while Aaamazara withers away."

"Enough talk about politics," Dr. Mendes chided. "The universe will go on even without your participation. There's a whole lot of people waiting to see you Jazzy, and a full luau spread waiting to be enjoyed."

Pell rubbed her flat stomach. "Sounds good to me," she licked her lips. Both Jasmine and her mother couldn't help but laugh. It really feels good to be back home, Jasmine realized as she followed her mother up the beach.

Ojana

Pell Ojana pushed back from the table. "That's it, I can't eat another bite."

"How about some more springwine?" Dr. Paolo Mendes held a decanter of the clear liquid up to Pell, but she waved it away. The gregarious marine biologist had a

winery of liquors, some legal and others not, stocked for the many parties the small staff of Cetacean Institute scientists on Pacifica frequently enjoined in with the native Pacificans.

Pell had at first been pleased to know that Bajoran springwine had been on his list, but after several shots of the bewitching spirit, she remembered why she didn't keep a bottle handy. Springwine packed a punch nearly as potent as bloodwine, and it tasted a hell of a lot better.

"I'll try some," the Antedean sitting beside Pell reached out a webbed hand. Dr. Mendes pulled the bottle back.

"Vyto, you know what alcohol does to you. The last time we had to strip you out of your hydration suit and toss you into the ocean to prevent you from being dried out."

The fish-like Antedean rolled her wide-spaced eyes. "Paolo, you exaggerate. It wasn't that bad."

"Speak for yourself," said Rory Kim, a human Pell had found increasingly attractive the more the night dragged on. "I can still remember how squishy you felt." He shook his head in mock disgust.

"Oh, you know you liked it," Vyto joked.

"Well...maybe a little," Kim playfully winked.

"That's enough you two," Ingrin said. "There are some things better left unknown."

"I can attest to that," Paolo remarked, raising his goblet, which was refilled to the brim with springwine. "Tonight is about celebrating the return of one of our own."

"Dad," Jasmine said sheepishly. "I'm just here for a few weeks...until I get a reassignment."

"And where is that husband of yours?" Uthula, an Andorian woman asked. Pell noticed that both of Jasmine's parents immediately frowned, and the small smile on Jasmine's face evaporated.

"He...he..."

"He couldn't make it," Pell said quickly. Though Ojana knew that Jasmine's parents were somewhat aware of her marriage troubles, she was certain that the rest of the small community weren't. Jasmine was a very private person and she would never reveal much about herself unless she knew the information wouldn't become public knowledge. "Since...the loss of our ship, he's been scouting out available commands."

Jasmine nodded, though there was an uncomfortable expression on her face.

"Those damn snakeheads," Tunk, a wily Tellarite, blustered into the conversation. "Sometimes I just wish we would pull anchor out of Cardassian space all together and let them figure their way out of the mess they created."

"We had, and continue to have, a responsibility to the Cardassian people," Kim spoke up.

Paolo sighed loudly, "Not again. Can we have at least one gathering where politics doesn't sour a good time?"

"I'm sorry Paolo," Kim turned toward the elder man, "and to you as well Jasmine, but this needs to be said. This whole refrain of abandoning the Cardassians that's gained steam in the last several months will only leave that part of space a breeding ground for terrorism."

"And Cardassia might fall under the influence of the Romulans or another hostile power." Vyto added.

"So?" Tunk crossed his large arms. "We've got our own problems that need fixing. We're expending far too many of resources on far too many fronts, and we're getting lackluster results. I believe that Satie is right, we need to marshal our resources and rebuild our infrastructure and institutions."

Kim rolled his eyes heavenward. "And do you think that the Romulans, Breen, and Tholians are just going to sit idly by while we stick our heads in the sand. This isn't the time for isolationism."

"And it really isn't the time for this tired debate either," Paolo grouched, and it was the first interruption Pell had seen in the man's nearly perpetual good cheer. He got up slowly from the table. "If you guys insist on turning this luau into another hot air punditry session, be my guess. Anyone care to take a walk with me on the beach?" Ingrin stood up. Paolo looked at Jasmine and then Pell.

The Bajoran decided to take her cue from Jasmine. "No Papi. It was a long trip from Jupiter Station. I promised to teach Pell some ancient yogic techniques and I would like to get started before I turned in."

"Okay," he said, a pinch of sadness in his eyes. But the regret disappeared under the wattage of his smile. "I hope you get a lot of rest tonight because there's been a lot of changes since you've been gone, and why I've got you here we're going to turn Pacifica inside out. Plus, Makara has been chattering nonstop since I told her you would be coming."

Jasmine chuckled. "Papi you never change." An errant, petty spike of jealousy lanced Pell's heart as she watched the exchange. She had never been able to grow old with either of her parents, the Cardassian occupation of Bajor had seen to that. Conversely she doubted she would ever be able to sit across from her own children and gaze on them with the love and pride she saw radiating from both Paolo and Ingrin to Jasmine. The Cardassians had also executed her husband Soyam for his 'crimes' before they had been able to start a family.

Pell had since found someone else special, Donald Sandhurst, the captain of the *Starship Gibraltar*. It had been a slow-building flame that flickered out far too quickly. To this day Pell didn't really know why neither she nor Donald had been able to put aside their fears and try to forge something longer lasting. Despite the problems currently plaguing Terrence and Jasmine, they had at least attempted to build a life together even if they were often on the opposite ends of the Federation for most of their marriage.

“Okay Papi, tomorrow I’m all yours,” Jasmine replied.

“Good,” both Mendes laughed. Paolo reached out his hand, and Ingrin wrapped hers around it. The two walked slowly into the night.

Jasmine stood up. She said her good nights to everyone still at the table, and Pell followed suit. She forced herself not to linger too long at Dr. Kim’s side. He was intriguing, but he was no Donald.

“Ready to stretch out some of that food?” Jasmine asked.

“Lead the way.”

Jasmine

Lying side by side on long floor mats, both flush with a mix of exhaustion and exhilaration, Jasmine finally pushed down her fear. “Pell...Ojana...do you think I should separate from Terrence?”

The Bajoran turned her head, and looked at Jasmine for nearly a minute before answering. “No.”

A flare of anger licked Jasmine’s throat. She opened her mouth to reply, to defend her decision, but no words came out.

“Do you think you should separate from Terrence?” Pell asked.

“I...I don’t know.”

“He’s a good man,” Pell said. “And he loves you. You’ve been such a positive influence in his life. I’ve known Terrence since he was a teenager. He was always gifted, but also he had a relentless side. There was a part of him that didn’t know when to back off. You’ve helped him find balance.”

“He told you this?” Jasmine asked, curious. She didn’t know how much of their marriage Terrence had discussed with Pell.

“No,” she nodded slowly. “He didn’t have to. It’s the way he acts now. Not quite as impetuously as before.”

Jasmine agreed. “I see.” She recalled her first meetings with the brash young captain. She had thought that the magnitude of the war alone had changed him, made him less cocky, and more empathetic, but perhaps she was wrong. Terrence had always displayed a sensitive side to her that often didn’t gel with his public persona, but the discordance between the two images had never quite sit well with Jasmine. She wanted him to be the same person he was with her as he was with everyone, because the Terrence he shared with her was Terrence at his most noble. “So what should I do now?”

“I really can’t tell you,” Pell answered truthfully, “but if it were me, I’d go and get my man back.” Her eyes moistened with tears. “I miss Soyam every day. It’s the one prayer that the Prophets have never granted me, the chance to see him, talk to him again. I guess when I die...” the rest of the sentence became garbled as Pell cried softly.

Jasmine reached out to the woman, gingerly placing her artificial hand on Pell's trembling shoulder. "I can be so selfish sometimes," she said. "Here I am about to jettison my marriage, and I'm totally oblivious to your pain and the fact that your husband was taken from you. I'm so sorry."

"There's nothing to apologize for," Pell sniffed. "It's not your fault. And there's nothing that we can do to turn back time," she paused, a slow smile forming over her lips, "unless I can steal a few minutes with the Orb of Time. Perhaps we can call up the old gang and do another black ops on DS9?"

Jasmine chuckled. "Well, I must admit it was fun stealing that cloaking device." She sat up, as her giggles got the best of her. Pell did the same.

"Yeah, I can just imagine the look on Kira's face, and the curses she had to keep in when that cascade virus shut down the station's power," the Bajoran's face quickly pinched, and Jasmine remembered that Colonel Kira, DS9's former station commander and an old acquaintance of Pell's, was still suffering brain damage caused by Ceti eels as part of a labyrinthine plot to assassinate the Cardassian Premier, Natima Lang. "Perhaps I shouldn't make light of my friend."

"I don't think Kira would be offended. From what you told me of her, she would more than likely want you to remember the good times," Jasmine offered.

"I hope so," Pell said. "I had intended to head straight to Bajor to see her, but after you offered this trip to Pacifica, I just couldn't resist. I know it's selfish, but I had a need to see and experience beauty before throwing myself back into the ugliness of the galaxy."

"There's nothing selfish about feeling that way at all," Jasmine replied.

"Thank you," Pell said, reaching forward and grasping Jasmine's right earlobe between her fingers. "Jasmine, you and Terrence are going to see your way out of this tunnel we're all in at the moment, and you'll come out together."

"I hope so," Jasmine whispered, and for the first time in a long time she meant it.

Hunter's Moon

Tai Donar tore through the brush, the thick foliage entwining around him, preventing him from reaching the screams.

Bare-chested and footed, armed only with a knife, Tai ignored the pain lashing across his feet, and the whelps puckering his chest. All that concerned him was that at least one of his men were down, the cry of pain so clear he was even certain that he knew who it was:

Darro. Both Darro and Corb had set off several minutes ago to relieve themselves. When they hadn't returned, Tai had ordered the rest of the cadre to hold their positions and he had set out for them.

The Iturii Jungle was an unforgiving place, ripe with predators of various species. That was why his cadre had been left there, to learn to survive with only the most basic weaponry. Here, Donar and his men would learn that their tenacity, their survival instinct, and if need be, their savagery were the only true weapons they would ever need.

Fighting the Tarsians demanded no less than a total commitment to victory, and such devotion required shedding the natural pacifism of Angosian society, which Tai didn't mind so much.

He was more concerned about the injections he and his men were constantly subjected to, and the strange words he would often hear the medical staff conducting each round of injections bandy about. A few times he had broken orders and asked one of the medics what exactly was being pumped into them, and the brisk reply would be that Tai and the other Angosian soldiers were being administered inoculations against Tarsian biological weapons.

Tai had seen enough footage of Tarsian atrocities to know that they were perfectly capable of such dishonorable, indiscriminate slaughter. But the pat answers still hadn't set right with him.

Even now, as he ran through the forest, his ears attuned in a way they had never been before to the sounds of flora and fauna, and his feet withstood the jutting rocks beneath him with only a smidgen of the pain he had felt initially. Tai's vision also cut through the dark canopy of trees overhead, and he knew that these gifts weren't the result of the stringent training regimen he endured every day.

He was being altered, changed. His old life gone, perhaps forever, but Tai didn't have time for regrets. If he survived the predator he was certain to find tearing into Darro, then he still had to survive the crimson fields of Tarsia.

Tai pulled up as soon as he neared the brush. He crept to the edge of the clearing, regulating his breathing in the process. Using a tree for cover, he peered into the clearing. Before he could stop himself, he gasped loudly.

The thing standing before him was a different type of vicious beast than he had been expecting. It stood over two meters, with a spiky, silver blue armor covering its massive body. In one gauntleted hand, it held a mewling Darro, in the other the hand was a scythe-shaped blade that sliced into the dying young man. Tai's sharp intake of breath gave the monster pause. It peered into the copse. Beneath its helmet was a lean, brownish yellow reptilian face, streaked with a bright red that might've been either blood or paint. Its eyes were as black and cold as night.

A shameful fear clutched Tai's heart, freezing him. Below Darro, Tai could make out the jumbled mass of another body. Corb, Donar realized, his eyes focusing on the stump where the young soldier's head had once been.

What manner of creature is this? Had the Tarsians hired mercenaries? Though Tai had never left Angosia, he had learned of vast interstellar civilizations as part of his education before war with the Tarsians had reduced his schooling to learning new weapons and survival tactics only. And all of the Angosian taxpayers' money had been wasted because Donar could do nothing at the moment but stare at the beast in the clearing.

The creature dropped Darro's body as easily as a sack of tube roots, and pulled a box-shaped device from the heavy belt on its uniform. It waved it around in a circle.

It's searching for me, Tai realized, slowly backing away from the tree, his heart stuck in his throat. I've got to get back to the others so that we can comprise a strategy to defeat this creature.

But the device emitted a large whine when the alien swung it in Tai's direction. The alien pulled up the large rifle slung over his chest, and took aim.

His hiding place discovered, Tai threw stealth to the winds as he raced as furiously in the direction he had just come from. Tai had barely taken a step before he found himself stomping air, his body flipping several times before landing painfully on the jungle bed.

The smell of ozone clogged his nostrils and his eyes glistened shamefully with fear of an approaching grisly death. It wasn't supposed to be this way, he realized, trying to sit up but unable. He was supposed to fight bravely, and die nobly if need be. He wasn't supposed to be afraid. He was the cadre leader. The men were his responsibility, and he had let two of them down, and was about to betray the others with his cowardice.

The idea of facing the gods with shame in his heart forced Tai to ignore his pain and fear. He rose slowly, fighting hard to ignore the jabbing pain in his side, or the blood seeping down his leg.

The creature walked with ease through the devastation it had made with its rifle, the barrel steaming. "Worthy prey," it nodded, surprising Tai again by speaking Angosian. "Unlike the others, you will not run." The creature glanced in the direction of the corpses of Darro and Corb. "It is your skull that I will mount. The others will fill my gullet."

Tai quickly scoured the jungle floor for a weapon. He bent down slowly to retrieve the now bloodied knife he had obviously fallen on. But already he could feel the searing heat from the wound ebbing, and the blood had slowed to a trickle.

He tried to remember everything his war master's had taught him, but all Tai could see where Darro and Corb's bodies, and all he could hear was this monster's boast.

"We'll see about that," Tai said quietly as he shifted into battle-stance....

Yosemite National Park

Earth

August 2376

"I know you aren't going to leave me hanging?" Lt. Juanita Rojas asked, her voice drenched with exasperation.

Tai yawned. "I can tell you the rest in the morning. El Capitan really wore me out. I'm turning in."

"Like Hell," Juanita grabbed one of the Angosian's huge biceps, a pleasing heat coursing through her fingers at the contact. Tai made no move to break free of her hold, but he repeated. "I'm turning in."

"But what happened?"

"I'm here telling you the story, so it should be an indication of the ending," Tai wryly remarked.

"I want to hear all the gory details," Juanita pressed.

"You are a strange one Juanita Rojas," Donar replied. "Most Terrans are far more squeamish."

"Well, you should've learned from my campfire story that I'm not like most Terrans." Rojas said with a hint of cockiness.

"Indeed," Donar remarked, before gently peeling Rojas's fingers from around his arm. "I'll tell you the rest tomorrow."

Juanita pouted and crossed her arms like a child. "You're no fun," she said in an exaggerated child-like voice.

"So I've been told," Tai rejoined before heading into the tent. He turned around. "Care to join me...perhaps we can..."

"Make up our own story?" Juanita finished his sentence, a mischievous gleam in her eye. "I'm glad that you've taken to role playing. This should be interesting." Tai waited at the flap of the tent while the Flight Control Officer extinguished the small fire they had built. Once finished, the air filled with a pleasing smoky tang. Juanita wrapped her arm around his, and pulled the large man closer. Kissing his cheek softly, she asked, "So, would you like to play the naughty nurse this time?"
