

Tales of Nurigen

Once a slum runner, always a slum runner

“Mo had run, only accompanied by a girl with an attitude problem and a perfect body. He drifted for a while, wondering if that really was a bad thing.”

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Mo cursed the ancient wreck of a craft he'd stolen and looked in the rear view screen for about the hundredth time.

“We seem to have lost them.” He said.

He couldn't remember her name, but the girl was glaring at him. She'd pulled a piece off her very expensive dress and was using it to stop a wound in her leg from bleeding.

“Why did you run ?!” She shouted.

“They'd killed two of my staff,” he said, “we were next.”

She looked at him as though he was completely stupid.

“They're just pay cops. They arrest you and take your money, then they let you go. There was no need to get bent out of shape about it.”

What was her name ? He'd been introduced, but then things had gone crazy and he'd been running for his life. He wasn't even sure why he'd pulled her along with him.

“I know pay cops girl, they were something else. Probably Hasad militia”

She actually snorted at him.

“Hasad, what do you know ? And don't you girl me, I'm Malika, the highest paid and most sought after model in the empire.”

Malika that was it, his PA had introduced them just a few seconds before the attack. His head of security lay dead in the City of Pendaris, his weapons trained PA left badly wounded and he'd ended up with a model ! All those highly trained people and Mo had run, only accompanied by a girl with an attitude problem and a perfect body. He drifted for a while, wondering if that really was a bad thing.

“Watch out !” She shouted.

They were flying low, he'd ruined the drives running from their pursuers. There was no way the small family runabout was going to climb higher, so he should have been more alert. He banked hard left and missed the thousand foot high needle of rock by mere inches.

“Idiot ! You're going to kill us.”

He looked back at her and wished the vehicle had a rear seat ejector. Her leg looked bad though, her dress was gradually turning an unpleasant shade of red.

“I'll see what I can find for your leg.”

“Thanks, but watch where you're going.”

“ok, ok.”

There was a parcel shelf full of old convenience food boxes, the owner of the vehicle seemed fond of anything deep fried and beige in colour. Empire rules stated that no craft could be flown without a full first aid kit in the driver's area. The trouble was that they were on an unaligned moon and empire rules didn't count. Mo knew the empire would quickly get bored with its new touchy feely policy and clear the galaxy of Hasad, he'd seen it all happen before. He opened the storage area next to his seat and there was no first aid kit.

“Damn.”

“What’s wrong.”

“No first aid kit.”

He pushed his hand into the jumble of rubbish in the storage area and found something long, thin and round. He pulled the DocStick out and looked at the use by date. Funny things could happen if you used an out of date stick, sometimes fatal things. He leant back and threw the stick to her.

“Just within the date,” he said, “do you know how to use it ?”

“Of course I do, I’ve had the safety classes.”

She took off the end cap and dug the three needles into her leg. There was the reassuring hiss as the DocStick pushed drugs into her blood stream and a few patented nano devices. With luck her wound would close and heal within about an hour. Another red warning light blinked on the dashboard. It seemed to flicker in unison with the other angry looking warning lights.

“Do you know anywhere decent to our right Malika ?”

“Why ?”

“Because the right side thrusters have just failed and we can’t turn left.”

She gave the sort of sigh that gave him a hundred word telling off in a single sound.

“I don’t understand how anyone kept this thing in the air,” he said, “it breaks just about every safety code, it’s a death trap.”

“What do you expect if you take a flyer from the junkers area ?”

“What area ?!”

They were very low now, almost tree top height, if the arid desert had any trees. Mo forgot all about watching where they were going and glared at her.

“The junkers. Where the cops put all the craft that fail routine safety tests.”

“Why didn’t you tell me ?”

Malika pulled herself up in the chair, her face going a dark red, her eyes glaring.

“Don’t you dare try to blame me ! I didn’t shoot anyone, I didn’t drag you along by your arm.”

Mo had wanted to throttle her, but then he remembered shooting one of the Hasad, before dragging Malika away from the battle. He’d done it to save her life, but she had a point.

“See this ?” She was pointing at her wound.

“If this leaves a scar my lawyers will take you for every credit you’ve got. If you’re lucky they’ll leave you enough to rent a flea ridden shack on Erasmus Seven.”

Mo look turned back in time to see the right side thruster warning light come on.

“Fuck !”

“What now ?”

“Now we can only go up or down and as the drives are useless, that means we can only go down.”

Mo had asked Chlo to stop looking in on his life, to break the link that tied him into the empire’s common comms channel. In fact he’d gone further and insulted her and the emperor, called them parasites and pariahs. But Mo still had an inkling that Chlo was watching him, she did seem to have an insatiable curiosity.

“Chlo, are you there ? Look, I know I was rude, but things look bad. I might not survive this one Chlo !”

Nothing, not even a voice in his head telling him to go to hell. Malika was unusually quiet, so he turned to look at her. The fashion model had a comb with a metal handle in her hand, she was pointing it at him.

“You’re crazy ! I knew it. Talking to the voices in your head.”

“Good. I was going to ask if you had a weapon. We’re going to land and there are likely to be some nasty creatures down there.”

“Don’t you have a blaster ?”

“No, I dropped it dragging you into this wreck.”

Mo started to reduce the power to the drives, almost hearing them give a sigh of relief. The craft was very old and he’d been running at full power for far too long. He started to gently descent towards the sand and rocks below.

“Don’t you dare bring us down out here !” Malika screamed.

Mo looked and she had the comb handle aimed at the back of his neck.

“See those mountain in the distance ?”

She looked through the front screen and nodded at him.

“They look a long way off now, but in less than twenty minute we’re going to run into them. Even running at low power, we’ll still die in the crash.”

He pointed at one of the red lights on the dashboard.

“That shows the vertical jets aren’t working, so we can’t simply land. Would you like me to list the other dozen things that don’t work ?”

“No.”

She’d relaxed quite a bit, the makeshift weapon was now by her side.

“In a way you’re lucky.” He said.

Mo brought the craft down to a height where they were barely missing the rocky outcrops below.

“Why ?”

“I’m one of the few people who has done this before. Not this model, but I crashed a Slingshot Nova into trees and everyone walked away.”

“You probably did it for fun.”

She was actually smiling at him.

“I’ll bring us down better without a metal comb in my neck. Are we ok ?”

“We’re ok. Just don’t talk to the crazy people in your head.”

Mo had decided that was probably a waste of time anyway. He’d told the empire to go to hell several times, but the last time had been pretty final. Mo had insulted the emperor, The Chalné, in public.

One of the few warning lights not flashing was for the foam protection system. Mo thought the red bulb had probably blown, but he didn’t mention that to Malika. On crashing the foam instantly filled the vehicle and solidified, allowing those inside to survive a devastating impact. Then the foam turned to liquid allowing escape from the crashed craft.

It sounded great on the adverts for family flyers, but in reality the systems only worked well for about two or three years. The craft Mo was flying had to be over twenty years old and it had been impounded by the cops for failing a safety inspection. There was a manual button to activate the foam, the trick was getting the timing right.

“Get right back in your seat,” he said, “I’ll hit the foam button just before we hit the ground.”

“Is that safe ?”

“Probably not.”

Flyers weren’t actually designed to fly. It sounded absurd and the body shape did provide enough lift to keep the craft in the air, provided the drives were running. Go too slow though and the average family flyer would drop like a stone. Another red light was flashing at Mo, it was bigger than the others, it was the low speed warning light.

“Any second now Malika.”

The bottom of the craft hit the top of a sand dune and they bounced back into the air. Mo took his hands off the steering device, it was useless now. He put his hand over the foam button and waited for the right moment. They bounced again, the craft seemed to still be going very fast, too fast.

There were rocks in front of them now, jagged rocks, hull tearing rocks.

“I’ve done alright for a slum runner.” He muttered.

As they hit the first rock the craft began to turn and spin. Mo hit the button to release the foam.

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Had he been unconscious? Mo coughed, the fumes from the foam stinging his eyes and throat. The ancient flyer was back the right way up, but the entire left side had been ripped away, leaving a spectacular view of the desert.

“We actually survived.”

Malika looked unharmed. Mo had heard stories of people surviving such crashes, but they’d been in fairly new flyers.

“The fumes are dangerous,” he said, “we should get outside.”

He helped her outside, noticing she was wearing a single very impractical high heeled shoe. He assumed the other one had been left behind in Pendaris. Luckily she seemed to have hung onto her shoulder bag, though he suspected it just contained makeup.

“We’ll look in the luggage trunk and then sort out your footwear.”

There was no need to worry about the trunk being locked, the lid had gone and the only thing left in there was a ten year old sports magazine.

“He was a murder ball fan.” Said Mo.

“It’s a miracle we’re alive.”

He turned and looked back the way they’d come and the desert was full of bits of metal and trash from the trunk. One large boulder in the distance had much of the left side of their flyer leaning against it.

“Not easy to miss if they’re still after us.”

Mo pulled up the thin carpet in the trunk to reveal a large hatch.

“Most people don’t even know their flyer had one of these,” he said, “you don’t get them in modern vehicles, but anything over fifteen years old has an emergency pack.”

He undid the catches and pulled up the lid and there was a first aid kit, still covered in a clear plastic wrapper. Inside was another DocStick, but it was twenty years outside the use by date. The box was full of medicines and creams, all dried up and useless.

“This is fine,” he said, “lasts forever and it’ll take the sting out of your wound.”

Much of the ridicule had gone out of her eyes now and she rubbed the cream over the bloody hole in her left leg.

“It’ll take a few minutes to work, then put the jar in your bag. Is there anything of any use in there?”

She rummaged and dug out a packet of tissues.

“Just this.”

Under the first aid kit was a heavy box, about three feet square. Mo pulled it out and upended the emergency tool kit over the sandy ground. There were was a flashlight, but the power cell had died years before. Spanners, an adjustable wrench, a few spare fuses. A hammer though, made of a good heavy metal. Mo put it in his belt and started to dig through the pile of unused tools. There was a roll of repair tape that still seemed sticky, so he kept that.

“Perfect !”

The knife wasn't long, but it was free of corrosion and looked sharp. Best of all it was in a scabbard, which he pushed into the other side of his belt.

"You'll need something besides the metal comb."

Mo picked up an adjustable wrench and swung it around.

"Heavy enough to put a predator off, but light enough for you to use."

"How do you know there'll be predators?"

"There are always predators."

Mo put the tool box on the sand and brushed the top clean with his hand.

"Sit down and take that ridiculous shoe off."

She threw the shoe some distance away and pulled at her ruined dress.

"Those ridiculous shoes cost me five hundred, the dress was over a thousand."

"If we survive I'll replace them."

Mo took off his expensive jacket, it was useless in the desert anyway. He cut the soft lining into several strips and began to wrap her feet, using the tape to hold it in place. Malika didn't pull back, but she was giving him an odd look.

"Trust me, you're not the first woman I've had to do this for."

How nice her face was when she wasn't scowling at him, how perfect her hair. Mo stopped himself looking too long at the smooth skin of her legs, such thoughts might lead to her scowling again. He took off his own shoes and put them over the cloth bundles on her feet and they were a good fit. A few layers of tape and the makeshift footwear looked almost practical.

"How do they feel?"

She walked a few paces and did the model pose she was famous for.

"Very comfortable, but you need shoes."

"I never wore shoes until I left the planet of my birth and I was middle aged by then. My feet are softer now, but I'll be fine without shoes."

"Was that the planet where you were a slum runner?"

"Yes and I wasn't just a slum runner, I was the best slum runner."

There was genuine curiosity in her eyes.

"What is a slum runner Mo?"

He picked up a bottle of old stomach medicine from the pile of useless and out of date remedies. Antacid, twenty five years old and useless, but there had been a pint bottle of the stuff. He poured the milky liquid over the ground and gave it a shake before putting the top back on.

"Here, put this in your bag, we can wash it out once we get to the water hole."

"What water hole?"

He pointed his arm towards a part of the desert that looked just like any other.

"The one I can smell a few miles in that direction."

She trusted him now, there was no hint of distrust as she put her hand above her eyes and peered into the heat haze.

"We should be going," said Mo, "they might still be looking for us."

"You still think it was Hasad assassins?"

"Yes."

He began walking across the sand, Malika following him.

"So what is a slum runner then?"

"When we find a safe place to camp for the night, I'll tell you."

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The water hole turned out to be a sizeable oasis, surrounded by trees and a kind of scrub grass. They lay flat on the top of a dune and surveyed the small lake not far away.

“Every creature for miles will come here to drink.” Said Mo.

“The water looks so cool Mo.”

He wondered how long it had been since she’d gone anywhere that wasn’t fully air conditioned. He felt hot, but Malika looked wrecked by a three hour walk in the afternoon sun. She looked so hot that he thought her wound might be infected.

“Show me your injured leg.”

It was fine, the DocStick had closed the wound and rebuilt the muscle and the cream had taken away the swelling.

“It’s fine, you’re just hot.”

“I’m so thirsty.”

“Me too. We’ll go down there, but we need to be careful. There will be something near that feeds on the creatures at the oasis.”

They crept through the coarse grass, watching the creatures that drank at the edges of the lake. They looked wary and ran away as soon as they saw Mo and Malika. Quite small and six legged, some of the creatures gave a high pitched cry as they ran away. Malika looked quite startled by them.

“Don’t worry they’re the plant eaters.”

“How do you know?”

“Because they’re running anyway instead of trying to eat us.”

Malika was approaching the water. It looked clean, but it was deep. Mo held her back from walking into the cool fresh water, the irresistible water.

“I’ve seen people lose arms and legs in places like this. Give me the bottle.”

He reached past where the animals had been drinking, no need to take a risk on there being parasites. Once the bottle was shaken a few times he emptied it and moved to another part of the lake. He repeated the action three times, Malika looking at him as though he was crazy. There was a slight wave in the centre of the lake and a snout appeared where Mo had last been filling the bottle, a large snout. The water churned and a tail briefly appeared before the creature was gone back into the deep water.

“It might have been harmless, the problem is you can never be sure.” Said Mo.

“Until you lose an arm.”

Mo filled the medicine bottle again and handed it to her.

“Not all of it, just a few mouthfuls for now.”

She gave the bottle back to him and the water tasted clean and pure. He’d have his medical team check them both once they were back in civilisation, but the water seemed fine.

“If we move further around the lake we can wash our faces, if we’re quick.”

They washed and then finished the water in the bottle. Mo refilled it and pointed in the direction of the mountains.

“There’s another water hole in that direction. We won’t reach it until tomorrow, but we can find somewhere to spend the night while we’re on the way.”

The moon had a strange orbit around its planet, there were only a few hours of night. Mo knew the nights were as hot as the days, so they needed to follow wherever the water holes took them.

“Can we stay here a little longer?” She asked.

“We really should keep moving.”

They'd gone barely a hundred yards when the predator appeared in front of them. It had six legs, which Mo assumed was the norm for creatures that had evolved there. The head and jaws though were similar to the countless other meat eating predators that inhabited planets and moons right across the multiverse. Two large ears, two large eyes set to look forwards, all the better to gauge the distance to its prey. The teeth though were the clincher; there was no arguing with the teeth, this was definitely a serious meat eater. Several rows of sharp teeth glistened in the sun as the creature rose from lying on the sand and looked at them.

"Keep still," said Mo, "it doesn't seem sure what to make of us."

It was no use, the creature gave a low gurgling growl and Malika turned and ran. The predator may not have seen people before, but its brain knew that only food tended to run away. It ignored Mo and ran after the girl, its jaws open and ready to bite.

"Stop running !"

Of course she didn't. Mo hadn't run over any roofs in a long time, or had to scale any walls to escape an angry mob. But he'd kept himself in shape and the creature didn't look anywhere near as scary as some of the monsters he'd fought. His legs had strange joints that seemed to defy anatomical logic, his muscles were far stronger than any humans, plus his DNA was hardly what could be called conventional. He leapt forward, easily catching up with the creature, jumping over it and landing on its back. The result was a tumbling mass of predator, Mo and an enormous amount of dry sand. He pulled the knife from his belt and waited for the creature to attack. Malika was now forgotten, the predator was glaring at the strange being who had dared to attack it.

"Come on then you bastard." Shouted Mo.

It was almost too easy. The creature ran straight at him and Mo just side stepped. His dagger went into the body of the creature as it went past and he pushed it in deep and dragged it through whatever internal organs the creature had. The predator died within seconds and Mo was left with just a claw mark on his forearm. Malika didn't seem to believe the creature was dead, she stayed some distance away for a while. Then she approached Mo and the looked at his arm.

"That looks bad, do you want the jar of ointment ?"

"No, I heal fast. The wound will have completely healed in an hour or so."

She never took her eyes off the dead creature, almost as though she thought it might return to life.

"Do you think there are more of them ?"

"Probably, we should keep moving."

He wiped the knife on the creature's fur and began walking towards the next water hole.

"What the hell are you Mo ?"

He didn't stop or look at her.

"A clever lady called Chlo once gave me a list of the demon DNA she found in me. I can't remember what they all were, can't see that it really matters. But one of them means that I heal really fast."

"Is that the same Chlo you were talking to in your head ?"

"Yes, that's the one."

She grabbed his arm and made him keep still and look at her.

"I'm worried about you Mo. There is no Chlo and Demons aren't real."

"Oh they're real enough, though there aren't as many as there used to be. Chlo is very real, it's me that's the problem. There are times when I wonder if I'm real."

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They'd covered another three or four miles by the time it became dark. There was little twilight and Mo didn't think sleeping on the ground was safe. They found a rock with a flat top in near complete darkness and clambered on top of it.

"Is it safe to sleep?" She asked.

"You can sleep, I'll keep watch."

He felt her hand on his arm and then it moved down and she held his hand in the dark.

"Your eyes will get used to the dark Malika."

Soon there was complete stygian darkness and they could see billions of stars twinkling overhead.

"So what is a slum runner, you promised to tell me?"

Her hand was trembling in the dark, so he turned towards her.

"Slum runners were on Ixir, my home world."

"I've never heard of Ixir."

"I'm not surprised. Ixir has been dead and gone so long that I think even the Gods have forgotten it."

He heard her chuckle.

"Mo is that another tall story? You're not that old."

"You'd be surprised. I was given immortality by the emperor himself."

He could feel her hand gripping his as she laughed.

"And he did that because you saved his favourite child from a desert somewhere?"

"No, and stop laughing at me. I helped him find where Estrin-Okanan, greatest of all the Gods was hiding."

One moment she was laughing and the next her lips had found his in the dark and they were kissing.

"Now Mo. Stop your stories and tell me about slum runners on Ixir?"

He kissed her on the forehead and put his arms around her.

"The slums of Ixir were infamous. Millions of people crammed into every nook and cranny, some living their entire lives without enough to eat. Not that their lives were usually very long in the slums. Existence was likely to be short, nasty and brutish."

"This isn't just a story is it?"

"No Malika it isn't. My mother told everyone that my father took her by force, just the once. When I was growing up though I noticed the softness in her voice when she mentioned him. I think he was welcomed into her bed and she really cared for him."

"Who was he?"

"If I tell you, you'll accuse me of tall stories."

"I won't, tell me?"

"All I'll say is that we lived in an area called Demon Corner."

She wasn't laughing, he could hear her steady breathing as he held her.

"You're not making this up are you Mo?"

"No, I'm not. I was born with legs that didn't look right and strength that kept me from being bullied. By the time I was ten we lived well compared to most, we even had clean water some days."

"But no shoes."

"Only the rich folk had shoes."

"I'm guessing slum runners didn't earn their living honestly?"

It was his turn to laugh.

"What is honesty in a place of madness? I took parcels of stolen goods over the roofs, that was my speciality. I delivered messages to friends, threats to enemies. On a few occasions I gave an early death to some who deserved it and to some that probably didn't."

"But you got away from that life ?"

"Yes, I picked the wrong target one day, a warrior woman, one of The Damned no less."

"And you went to prison ?"

"No, she hired me to do a job for her. She needed the services of a good thief."

He could feel her chuckling again.

"I believe the bit about your mother, but the rest..... Are you still playing with me ?"

He thought for a moment and decided a little bit of evidence was called for, he was asking someone he hardly knew to believe a lot.

"There is something I can show you, if it works."

She was hugging him, all fear of what might be in the darkness forgotten.

"Is it a trick, I like tricks."

"It isn't a trick my girl, this is real magic."

"Show me, show me !"

"I had a friend called Luri, who became a goddess, but that is another story. I worked with Luri for quite a while and although I'm not very good at magic..... I can produce fire."

"Don't tell me. You worked with her looking for Gods who were hiding ?"

He had to admit that the way she said it.... It did sound rather absurd.

"Er.... Actually yes we did. But despite my lack of ability Luri taught me how to create enough fire to light a camp fire and..... if I'm on form..... a fireball."

Mo hadn't used the spell for hundreds of years, but he moved his fingers in the way he'd been taught, stopping just short of the final pass. He practised a few times, knowing the movements had to be flowing and continuous.

"I knew you couldn't do it."

"Be patient."

He moved the fingers of his right hand in just the right way and pointed his palm at the night sky. Malika grabbed him tight as a bright orange ball of flame appeared above them and then hurtled into the sky, expanding as it went.

"Mo, you weren't lying."

They kissed again, but Malika looked up into the sky and froze.

"Did you do that ?" She asked.

"No, that's likely to be the imperial fleet."

Some of the stars looked to be moving across the sky, hundreds of them.

"There are so many."

"Yes, I was hoping they'd come to rescue me, but I think they're here to wipe out the Hasad."

The moving points of light grew larger and then energy beams came down from them, aimed at somewhere far away, the other side of the mountains. More beams and then a while later the sounds of explosions reached them. There was answering fire, energy beams hurtling up into the night sky from somewhere miles to the south of where they huddled together on the rock.

"Silly of them," said Mo, "the empire doesn't like being attacked."

More beams from the imperial fleet and some of the moving lights dropping towards them, before heading off in the direction of the mountains.

"Raptors," said Mo, "imperial raptors. The Hasad don't stand a chance against those."

The sounds of explosions were becoming more frequent and in the silence between they could hear the cries of creature frightened by the strange disturbances.

"Would you like to be up there with your friends Mo ?"

"I think friends might be over stating things. I think we're in the perfect spot for this battle, miles away from anyone."

The sounds of battle diminished quite quickly and eventually they fell asleep.

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In the morning, they drank what was left in the water bottle and tried not to think of food. Neither of them knew the local berries and fruits, so they'd decided to go hungry in the hope of reaching a town fairly quickly.

"We can easily go three or four days without food." Said Mo.

"My agent said I could do with losing a pound or two."

Mo look at her perfect body and decided that her agent was an idiot. He sniffed the air, picking up the smell of burning, but he could still get a direction on the water hole. He pointed off into the distance.

"That way and it's only about two miles."

She trudged beside him, the makeshift shoes still in one piece.

"I didn't dream that, I know I didn't."

"Dream what?" He asked.

"You created a fireball."

"Yes I did."

The night had been hot and the day started to get hotter. They could both smell the water hole long before they saw the trees swaying in the breeze. The lake was smaller than the last oasis, but the same type of eight legged creatures ran away as they approached.

"Same routine as before. Get some water and move to a different spot to wash." Said Mo.

They both came to a halt when they saw the escape capsule, half buried in the sand. It was a standard one person capsule and there were footprints leading away from it.

"They're wounded." He said.

There was blood on the edge of the capsule and a trail of blood next to the footprints.

"Is it Hasad?" She asked.

"No way of telling, there are a lot of shuttles in this area. It could be Hasad, or a merchant caught up in the battle. Let's fill the bottle and then see where the tracks go."

He knelt at the lake and filled the old medicine bottle, handing it to Malika. As she drank the first large calibre metal bullet hit him just above his trouser belt.

'No one uses projectile weapon anymore.' He thought.

The second bullet hit him in the right side of his chest and Mo fell face forward onto the ground.

Malika looked and saw someone dressed in a dark grey uniform. It was a man, he was some way off, but it was definitely a man. He was putting the weapon back over his shoulder, he obviously wanted her alive. She noticed he was limping, it might give her the edge she needed to escape. Malika put the bottle back in her shoulder bag and ran.

"What would Mo do?" She muttered.

The creatures scattered as she ran and there was a group of high rocks in front of her. Cover, yes they would give her cover. She ran, faster than she ever remembered running, not daring to see how far he was behind her. She tried to remember who wore grey uniforms? Hasad? All the imperial fighters she'd see had been in black. The rocks were piled up on top of each other and Malika stopped and looked behind her. She was faster than him, but he was still too close. She was going to climb the rocks, surely his wounded leg would mean he couldn't follow. Then she saw the cave entrance, half hidden behind a dry dead bush.

“Go in there and you’re trapping yourself.”

She could hear Mo saying the words, but she instinctively wanted to hide herself away and underground seemed the perfect place to hide. She took the wrench from her bag and ran into the cave, praying to several different gods.

“Please don’t let it be home to a monster.”

There was some light coming in from the entrance, but fairly soon she had to slow down and let her eyes adjust to the gloom. The cave was quite small and there were no signs of anything using it as a home. In one corner the rock had sheered, leaving a gap just big enough for her to squeeze into. Malika hid herself in the gap, wrench at the ready.

“Please don’t let him see the cave, please don’t let him see the cave.”

There were sounds outside and a lot of grunts as he clambered over the rocks. After that it was quiet for so long that she thought he’d given up, but then she heard the bush outside being moved.

“I can see your footprint girl. It’ll be easier for you if you give yourself up.”

She looked and he was taking the weapon off his shoulder and leaning it against the cave wall.

“Don’t make me come and find you !”

He had a light. Only a small pocket light, but it seemed to bring daylight into the small cave. He saw her hiding and he started to grin. Not a happy grin, but one that looked evil and cruel.

“There you are my pretty. We’re going to have some fun before I kill you.”

She wasn’t going to just give up, she held the wrench up and moved towards him.

“You won’t have much fun with a crushed skull.” She said.

He was wary now, taking a knife from a pouch on his sleeve.

“I’m going to stick this in your guts girl and then I’ll fuck you.”

She hadn’t realised how big he was until he was up close. He was a good foot and a half taller than her, so she lowered the wrench and hoped she’d be able to hit him between the legs with it.

“I’m going to hurt you really bad bitch.”

As she started to swing the wrench, his head exploded. She still hit him, landing blow after blow on his dead body. She calmed down and saw Mo in the cave entrance, still holding the old projectile rifle. He thumped the blood stain on his chest.

“I told you I heal quick. This is nothing compared to what I’ve been through.”

In truth he didn’t feel that good and had to use the old rifle as a walking stick. Malika rushed over to him and hugged him, causing more pain in his stomach wound.

“How Mo ? How did you survive that ?”

“Demon blood. Not sure which demon, but Chlo once told me that as long as my heart still beats, I’ll heal up and survive.”

He found himself leaning on her, so collapsing and sitting on the ground seemed the polite thing to do. She sat next to him.

“Was he a Hasad ?”

“No, I have no idea what he is, might be a raider caught up in the fighting. That is the trouble when humans fight humans, both sides look the same.”

She gave him the water bottle and then she rubbed ointment onto the bullet wounds, though they already looked closed up and healing.

“It was true Mo, wasn’t it ? Demons, the empire, even Chlo ?”

He held his hand up as though taking a vow.

“Every word.”

It took him a couple of hours to feel well enough to leave the cave. First they searched the dead man and took his knife and spare ammunition for the old rifle.

“This is a mystery,” said Mo, “they haven’t made projectile weapons in this galaxy for hundreds of years.”

Mo easily shot and killed one of the plant eating creatures, showing Malika how to clean the carcass and prepare the meat for cooking. They both felt more confident now that they had a weapon. It may have been ancient, but the large bore rifle was deadly and accurate.

“Look what I found in his escape pod.”

She was holding a bottle of Ushong 48, just about the smoothest hard liquor in the system.

“Good food, good booze. Do we want to be found?” He said.

Wood was scarce, but they found enough for Mo to set a spark to and cook the best looking bits of the meat on the embers. A decent meal seemed to give their adventure a holiday feel, so they opened the Ushong and gradually the stress of the day melted away. He kissed her and she kissed back, open mouthed and eager. Mo had just placed his hand on one of her perfect breasts, when he felt her freeze.

“Sorry, I thought you wanted.....”

She was staring over his shoulder and as Mo turned he saw the five warriors dressed in black. They all had at least two weapons and they stood with the easy and relaxed stance of the experienced warrior. Mo felt Malika tense as one of them unfurled a set of wings and beat them a few times. They had the setting sun behind them, so they were difficult to identify, but the smaller one in the front was definitely female. She approached and picked up some of the meat, chewing it.

“Not bad.” She said.

She put her hand out to Mo and helped him to his feet.

“For someone in deep trouble, who thought he might not survive, you seem to be doing pretty well Mo.”

“I fucking knew it,” he said, “I knew you’d still be watching me Chlo.”

~ ~

The End

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