

The Hunter and the Tiger

by Brandon Hill and Terence Elliot

I always know my hunter before I see him.

I know his name, and he knows mine, but we never use them. Rather, we use our pet names for each other. For almost as long as I have known him, he has been my hunter, and I, his Tiger.

I know he is there when the smoke of riss incense fades, and the fragrant haze of pleasure is replaced by the delightful combination of cologne and his unique human scent.

He wastes little time in conversation, saving it for afterwards. I do not have long to wait before he introduces pleasure of another, familiar kind, and I am all too happy to reciprocate. Enfolded in the firm, yet soft embrace of my strong hunter, I do not need the pleasure-enhancing riss. He is gentle with me, and his nimble hands know exactly where to please me. I purr unabashedly, embraced in the rippling muscles of his solid, powerful arms, and I hold nothing back as we have our fill of each other, as many times as our stamina allows.

He is the only human who not only looks to me to satisfy him, but also satisfies me perfectly. With him, I never insist upon payment, even though it extends my already lengthy tenure of indenturement. He takes me neither out of reluctance, nor the lack of availability of the

other, more human-looking girls. They are An'Kya, while I am Re'Kya, but my hunter chose me. He is the only human whose fears or prejudices I do not need to first assuage before we begin. He is undisturbed by my appearance: my muzzle, my broad, tapered ears, my fur, my stripes - everything that brings to mind an ancient taboo which makes humans less inclined to choose me, as my kya so strongly resembles the animals of lost Earth. My hunter is different. He sought me from the beginning and wanted only me.

As often as he has been able, he has hunted his Tiger. It is not a difficult hunt, for he knows the address in the alleys of Xiao's Tiāntáng City where he can find the café; he knows the resident house mother with whom he must arrange the meet, and the loft where his Tiger can be found. And the Tiger relishes her capture.

As humans go, he is handsome to me, though he has said that his looks have made others uneasy; his hair is straight, black, and neck-length, combed back immaculately when he greets me, and much disheveled when we are finished. But his facial hair, trimmed into what humans call a goatee, is always perfectly coiffed. A patch covers his left eye –or where it once was, before it was ripped out by one of the wild mutant beasts of Siberna. Despite the eyepiece that conceals his disfigurement, it is impossible to not see the massive scar left by the creature's claw, leaving only his right eye, small and gray, but very sharp and keen.

Following our passions, he shares many stories of his hunts and exploits, but the tale of the creature is a mutual favorite of ours. I have lost count of how many times he has told it to me. I pretend that he never has before, and he tells it again with the same enthusiasm, leading me to wonder if he is merely gullible, or if he simply enjoys entertaining me. So, while the coolness of my suite dries the sweat from our bodies, I listen to him recount his fateful hunt, his near-brush

with death, and his subduing of the beast that had threatened the interior villages, in spite of his injury.

He loved me as one savoring the last taste of food before fasting the last time I saw him, and I matched his hunger in the bed as best I could. This was not unusual of itself; he does this each time before a mission, as if he is certain that we will never meet again, but I suppose that last time was perhaps portentous, as for the first time, I actually thought that I would need the riss to keep up with him.

And then, I never saw him again.

When last we talked, he seemed to want to say something, and I surmised what it would be. I wanted very much for my hunter to say it. I knew he liked me; if the frequency of his visits had not proved it, his scent certainly did. Humans often lie with their lips, but their bodies will just as often betray them. Still, I was never able to learn the depths of the truth until three months later.

Combat Pay Blues

By Brandon Hill

Siberna Prime's narrow, labyrinthine streets were nightmare for the common visitor, especially during this time of the year, with the press of crowds for the annual Gestalt tournaments. But Isibar spent much of his youth on these twisted lanes, and knew his destination well: a small café near the city's edge, far away from the main congestion of pedestrian traffic. In the distance, he could hear the low, thunderous claps of metal upon metal and elated cheers from the titanic Million Man Stadium. The minor league championship matches were in full swing, and he wondered in passing if his cousin Xerxes, a talented Gestalt pilot himself, was in the running to place this year. Last he heard, Xerx had nearly made it to the major leagues the previous year. He considered sneaking in some time to take in one match, but with a wistful sigh, dismissed the thought; this was strictly a business trip. Though it was seldom enough that he'd run into family outside of An're'hara, knew he would have to look up his cousin another time.

His contact had arrived first: a Victor unit that had identified himself as Seven over their

video exchanges. Androids were notoriously punctual, and also conspicuously dressed -neat as a pin in a suit of pale blue and antiseptic white amongst the earthy tones and casual wear of the natives and sightseers.

“You are late.”

Isibar expected this. Rolling his eyes, he sat down in the waiting opposite chair.

“I’ve taken the liberty of ordering your usual,” Seven said, exuding politeness on the next breath. So typical. He gestured congenially towards the tall, foaming mug of lager on the table.

“Thanks; don’t mind if I do,” Isibar said, for once grateful for the courtesy, despite its having been borne of programming, rather than genuine kindness. Siberna was perpetually hot –a climatic after-effect from the Imperium Wars. He drained half the mug in one draft, and put it down heavily. “So, Mr. Seven, you said you have a job for me?”

“A most unusual request, actually,” Seven said. “Our other contacts were... less than enthusiastic about taking the job, however.”

“My good android!” Isibar crossed his arms and fixed him with a condescending look, clicking his tongue “You went to all those people *before* me? You do wound me to the quick.”

“You may change your mind, once you know the details of the mission,” Seven warned, and reached into his right coat pocket. He removed a cylinder that housed a rolled-up dat-sheet, which he unfurled from a smaller cylinder inside. Upon its stainless steel surface, a biohazard symbol was printed in bright red. Isibar noted the words, TOP SECRET in large, red letters upon its transparent, paper-thin surface, as well as a small square sectioned off at its bottom right corner.

“You know the procedure,” Seven said, and gestured towards the small square.

Isibar frowned. “I don’t like nano-machines. And I like having them swim up into my brain even less.”

“It’s for our protection, as well as yours,” Seven needlessly reminded him, and Isibar’s frown became a grimace.

“Yeah, I know, but every time I do this, I think that one of those things is going to ‘accidentally’ wipe out more than it’s supposed to.” He knew the rules; safety first, and all that. Should he refuse the mission once he heard the details, the nanos would wipe his memory of the conversation.

“Human paranoia,” Seven remarked flatly. “You *can* refuse right now, if you so choose.”

Isibar frowned, and pressed his thumb onto the square.

The warning scrolled away, replaced by a series of ones and zeroes. Seven spun the sheet around and began reading.

“Section-R of the Colonial Alliance Provisional Council requests your assistance in countering the clear and present threat of the Second Imperium. Should you agree to the following mission, you are hereby ordered to Icona-”

“Wait just one moment; rewind!” Isibar said, flailing out a halting gesture. “I could be going senile, but did you just say ‘Icona’?”

“Yes,” Seven answered.

“*The* Icona? Capital of the Second Imperium, Icona?”

“Yes.” There was no frustration held within the android’s verbal stoicism. “Do you wish to know more, or should I activate the nano-machines?”

Her Hand in Mine

By Brandon Hill and Terence Elliot

1

I would never have believed that on the day that Sar'vana returned to my life, I would begin to die. It wasn't real death, mind you. But slowly, irrevocably, the man that I was faded away, bit by bit, becoming ever more a stranger to Zynj, the planet of my birth -if I had not already been so. Bit by bit, I was reborn, free of my world's constraints. I became whole and complete, and healed of a disease I never even knew I had.

I saw the ship landing on the day it began, at the tail end of a dust storm that had my convoy grounded for a full hour. The blinding darkness and flesh-eating particles of glass and jagged sand that blew in 100 mph winds was pleasant summer weather for my planet. And we were thankful to only be waiting an hour. As the skies reverted to what passed for clear, I saw it coming in for a landing. The craft was unmistakably Felyan; I had seen them before in videos, but it had been ten whole years since I'd gotten to look at an actual one. It was just like I remembered: a tapered bullet with no visible gun or exhaust ports upon its shining surface. It possessed an almost organic sleekness that put even the most streamlined vessel from any of the Colonies to shame. Its immaculate hull was glaringly incongruous against the bleak, windswept valley that had been pockmarked with ancient craters and curtained above by leaden clouds of poison. It landed without a sound upon the distant tarmac, and I stared, wondering what the occasion was, until the radio crackled the foreman's irate voice.

"Hey, Galway! You fell asleep out there or something?" The volume alone shook me

unpleasantly from my reverie. “I said move! This slag ain’t gonna haul itself!”

And so it was back to business. I hit the truck’s throttle and my job continued as it had since I turned sixteen: hauling slag from the ruins of old Valis, one of millions of what remained of Zynj’s surface cities, crushed by the Imperium Wars, and now only so much scrap metal on the convoy to the processor. I was a Class-A hauler, licensed to lead the convoys and operate the processor that purged the radiation and toxins from the slag, and separated it into its constituent parts to be shipped offworld. The scrap was the only reason why Zynj still had a human population, and probably the only reason the Felyans still dealt with us, not that their help had been appreciated, with how much I’d heard the Elders whine about it on news reports. I read once that Zynj had been the most populous of all the Colonies before the war; now our population was so scant, it would be centuries yet before we ran out of cities to scrap, possibly millennia. God only knew what would become of us then.

Only after work did I have time to truly be myself. But this was usually after Chester, my friend and coworker, dragged me along to have a drink with him in the local pleasure house. Sure as sandstorms, he caught up with me after we exited the decon room, still reeking of that salve they sprayed on you while buck naked. Realizing that I had been holding my old respirator through the entire process, I threw it into the recycler just as Chester came to my side and threw his arm around my neck: a bit of a feat, considering how much larger and thicker of build I was compared to him.

“Jules!” His shout echoed off of the tiles of the locker room. “Come, my friend! We party tonight!”

Ducking out of his impromptu embrace, I paused to give myself a cursory view the mirror above the sink. I had dressed in fresh clothes and the chemical bath had wiped away all of the toxic grime from me, but I never was what anyone would call handsome. My dirty blond hair seemed always wild and unkempt; my face was a mask of conflicting features, with its broad nose and incongruously soft-looking brown eyes set upon leathery skin. My facial hair grew out to a simple five o’clock shadow, but no farther. Ironically, this rugged look was not as off-putting as it ought to have been, and I did manage to attract a fair amount of unwanted attention from plenty of girls in the sector: a fact that Chester found amusing, much to my irritation.

“What’s the occasion?” I asked, at last satisfied that I could do much worse with my appearance.

“What indeed?” The freckles upon my friend’s ruddy face seemed even darker when he grinned this broadly. “Keisha’s there, and she’s been asking about you.”