

Sparks in a Cold War

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Three Earth hours later, they sat on the styroplatform in the center of camp, pretending that nothing happened. They were lithe, thin and strong, reedy in the way that athletic women were, and not nearly as brittle as they looked.

Bryer turned on the perimeter, then a punched button which raised the UV roof. He had a lot of work ahead of him, not the least of it protection against the Cuiesto. And if the Alliance heard what happened this afternoon, they would make sure he never worked again.

"No roof, Bryer." Audra straightened her long legs and leaned her bronze face toward the blazing sun. "I'd like to experience the elements."

"You've been experiencing the elements all day." Liv walked toward the semi-permanent canopy stretched between the three main tents. "I think we've had enough of experience."

It was the first reference to the day's events, and the first quiet dig.

"I don't care if we're protected or not," said Keely. She was the smallest of the three and, Bryer had noted, the strongest. "All I want is a beer."

Bryer had been with these three long enough to recognize that statement as a command. He ignored it.

The perimeter wasn't going to keep them safe for long. It would hide their presence and, with the roof up, make it impossible to fire a weapon at them. But it also blinded them. An ambush could be set up outside -- gliders floating above the cutgrass, perhaps, or something more sinister -- and he wouldn't know until it was too late.

"I thought we weren't going to drink until the sun set," Audra said.

Keely's face flushed. "I thought we weren't going to bitch about anything."

"Too late," Audra said. "Liv already started."

The roof finished closing with a loud click. Keely jumped as if someone had shot at her. Liv gazed upward.

Audra sat up. Her dark eyes met Bryer's. "I said no roof."

"Yes, you did." He crossed his arms. "And I said no shooting without my permission."

She shook her head. Her red hair, wrapped in braids around her skull, made her look as if she were wearing a helmet. "You're as bad as the others."

"No," he said. "I'm worse. I'm the one who has to save our asses."

"You make it sound like I committed a crime."

"You did." Keely got out of her chair and walked toward the cook camp. He heard the portable refrigerator beep as it dispensed her beer.

"We're all committing a crime," Audra said, leaning back and closing her eyes. "That's part of what we're paying you for."

Technically, she was right. Extreme Safaris took their clients to unsanctioned or dangerous worlds, trips which could result in serious fines or, in Bryer's case, the loss of his ship's clearance for those areas. So far, Bryer had managed to avoid the fines simply by having his clients sign a document that said they had insisted on a trip to the unsanctioned area. He had never had his clearance removed, but he figured it wouldn't be a serious problem. He could always charter another ship.

"You shot a sentient being," he said. "You didn't pay for that right."

"Oh?" She tilted her head toward him. "Is there a higher fee for that?"

He didn't trust himself to answer her. He could barely restrain himself from crossing the styroplatform and wringing her neck.

"Audra, enough." Keely squeezed her beer. The cap levitated off and deposited itself in the recycler.

"Mr. Bryer is doing his best."

"If he were doing his best," Audra said. "He would have let me take my trophy."

"Your trophy would have been the head of someone's child." His fists squeezed tight, but he held them at his side.

"Everything we kill is someone's child. And sometimes, sentient or not, those creatures miss that child." Audra stood up, dusted off her light, crease-free shorts, and headed toward the refrigerator. "You're being a hypocrite, Mr. Bryer."

She passed him as she said that and gazed into his eyes, challenging him.

"As I said before this trip started, there is game and there are natives. We don't hunt the natives." He wasn't sure why he was arguing with her. Probably because it was preferable to killing her.

"Kind of makes you guilty of false advertising, doesn't it?" Audra bent down, grabbed a can of white wine, and pulled it out of the refrigerator. She squeezed the can, and the cork popped, pausing before her so that she could inspect it before it got recycled. "After all, the word 'extreme' implies something out of the norm."

"My company doesn't sanction murder," he snapped.

"Really?" she asked. "Is that what you think happened this afternoon?"

She had an odd look on her face and he suddenly felt uncertain. He had thought the afternoon's events had been an accident, but he had never been able to get a clear read on her.

She and her two partners had approached him, as all of his clients did, and they had paid his exorbitant fee like everyone else. He never knew who his clients were. As long as they could pay and abide by his rules, they could go on his safaris.

He hadn't regretted that rule until this trip.

These women, though, seemed uninterested in the various places he had taken them and he had sensed no thrill at the hunt. He had thought it was because he failed them, failed to bring them game that challenged them.

But something in her gaze made him wonder if he had been wrong. If that afternoon, something had happened he hadn't entirely understood.

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They had used glider cars with their screens down to reach the Range, a wide-open section of grassland and youngling trees where Gracela could be found. Gracela had several features that made them perfect for a safari geared to humans.

First, the gracela were hard to find. They were scattered throughout the Range, but their mottled coats blended with the browns and greens of the landscape. They were among the fastest creatures in Alliance-controlled space. When spooked, a gracela could hit speeds at over a hundred and fifty kilometers an hour. And they were ferocious if cornered. He'd seen a gracela turn on a hunter, and shred the man's skin off his bones using only teeth and hooves.

But most important of all, the gracela were elegant creatures. Long snouts, wide dark eyes, angular ears that gave the face a beauty not found in the game in this far sector of the galaxy. Hunters who liked to follow the ancient tradition of hanging the head as a trophy would have something beautiful for the wall. The other hunters, who didn't have such barbaric instincts, usually had still holos made of themselves with the carcass. A stunning kill was always more impressive than a big ugly one.

He'd brought the three women this part of Mgasin almost in despair. They were the best hunters he'd ever traveled with, taking down game as difficult as the nazon and the quyn with barely any work at all. Audra kept pushing him for a challenge, and finally he thought of the gracela -- fast, beautiful, and vicious, rather like the women themselves.

But they'd killed two-thirds of their quota of gracela in less than an Earth hour and it was only on the trip back that they had run into the young Cuiesto.

That was when everything changed.

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Audra was watching Bryer. She leaned against one of the support columns, its cheap plastic distorting her reflection.

"We wanted a challenge," she said softly. "You couldn't provide one. So I had to do the work myself."

He stared at her. She had known exactly what she had been doing. Somehow that made everything worse.

It took only a second for that thought to pass through his mind, for his hand to find her throat and pull her toward him. Her expression didn't change -- or perhaps it did, filled with amusement at his reaction.

He squeezed like she had squeezed the wine can, and part of him wondered if her head would float toward the recycling bin like the cork had.

Keely grabbed his arm, her small fingers warm against his skin. "Let her go."

He continued to squeeze, watching little bloodshot lines forming in Audra's eyes. Her face was turning an unbecoming shade of red.

"Let her go," Keely said again, then she reached around his side, grabbing for the stunner.

He caught her with his free hand. He held both women for just a moment, to see if Liv would come to their aid. Liv watched from the other side of the styroplatform.

She didn't move.

Bryer let Audra go. To his immense satisfaction, she staggered backwards and coughed, putting a hand -- involuntarily, he guessed -- to her throat.

"You little fool," he said. "You didn't make this challenging for you. You made it challenging for me. I'm the one who has to get us out of here."

She smiled at him, still hunched over, her fingers playing with her neck. His hand left a red mark there that was beginning to bruise.

"Then maybe you should pay us," she said, her voice hoarse.

He cursed and lunged toward her, but Keely held him in place.

"Stop it, Audra. Stop baiting him now. We need him."

Audra stood slowly, her face filled with hatred. He wondered how he ever thought her beautiful. "We don't need him. We can manage without him better than we'll manage with him."

"Fine," he said and twisted himself free from Keely's grasp. He strode toward the organizational tent, reached toward the easy access controls and shut off the perimeter.

Around him, the cutgrass spread like an ancient lake, the sharp blades glittering in the sun. The very edges of the grass pushed up against the Range, outlined like waves against a beach.

He had just revealed their presence to the Cuiesto and a large part of him no longer cared. He nodded mockingly at Audra.

From inside the tent, his assistant cried out a warning. Nendre must have realized the perimeter was off. Bryer heard the slither of tentacles and knew that Nendre would soon join him.

"I thought you were going to leave," Bryer said.

Audra laughed. "Why should I? Things are about to get very interesting."

He walked toward Audra. She smiled at him, and let her hand drop away from her neck.

"I figured you'd want to play," she said. "This makes everything so much better. We're not hiding here. We become visible, we let them come to us, and then we act. I suggest we take down the camp, go as far as we can, see if we make it before the Cuiesto find us -- "

He grabbed her arms. She let out a small startled shriek, which surprised him. He didn't think anything made her cry out. Then he shoved her backwards, so that she fell off the styroplatform and into the cutgrass.

Keely screamed. Liv continued to watch. Nendre had come out of the organizational tent and was unfurling a tentacle so that he could reach Audra.

"You stop," Bryer said.

"But Jack, we cannot do this." Nendre's voice sounded even more mechanical than usual.

Audra struggled in the cutgrass. She was smart enough not to move much. Any movement she made would slice her skin. She had on no protection at all.

"You bastard," she shouted.

He watched from the edge of the platform. He'd shoved her hard and she'd flown at least five meters away. The clear glass was down near her. He was surprised a blade hadn't sliced through her back.

"Turn the perimeter back on," Bryer said to Nendre.

"You'll kill her," Keely cried.

He reached inside Audra's tent and found her laser rifle -- the very thing she had used to kill the poor Cuiesto. He tossed it to her, making sure it landed at least a meter away, so that she couldn't pick it up and fire it at him.

"Turn on the perimeter," he said again.

Audra got up slowly. She looked toward the rifle, then to the camp. Blood dripped off her left arm.

"Regulations, Jack -- "

"Regulations." Bryer covered the five steps toward the easy access controls. "We are so far outside of regulations now that this one more case won't matter. In fact, killing her might argue in our favor."

Audra used a booted foot to stomp down a section of cutgrass. She was moving across it quicker than he had expected.

Nendre hadn't moved, his hulking round frame, tentacles coming off all sides, filling the organizational tent's doorway. "We can't do this."

Bryer had had enough of can'ts and should haves and regulations. "We can do anything we damn well please."

He reset the perimeter. With a hum, it shimmered into place, cutting off Audra's angry scream outside.

"Let her back in," Keely said.

His fingers found the rest of the controls. He set the security protocol. Now no one could touch the perimeter except him.

Keely pushed at him. "Let her back in."

He caught Keely's fingers with his own. Her eyes narrowed and she struggled, but he held her fast. She may have been the strongest of the three women, but he was stronger than anyone else here.

"Maybe I'll let her back in," he said softly, holding Keely fast. "In a few hours. By then she might understand what it feels like to be hunted."

"You have no right," Keely said, jabbing him in the stomach with her elbows.

She had knocked some of the wind from him. "I have every right," he said, letting go of her hands and stepping out of her way. "Audra gave it to me by changing the rules. Either you do things my way or you join her in the cutgrass. And, if that happens, I promise I'll give you the challenge of getting out of here all on your own."

Keely opened her mouth as if she were going to respond and then she dove for the easy access panel. When her fingers touched it, the security system gave her a electronic jolt.

She cried out and backed away.

"Touch it again," he said, "and the jolt will be twenty times higher."

She held her fingers against her chest, staring at him like a chastised child.

"You'll do things my way," he said, not just to her, but to Liv and Nendre as well. "Or you won't get out of here alive."

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Even if they listened to him, he wasn't sure any of them would get out of this place alive. Audra had put them in a terrible position.

The Cuiesto were one of Mgasin's sentient races. They were at war with another sentient race, the Viotu. The Viotu were a highly technical race who subdued the planet the way that humans had once subdued Earth. The Cuiesto were the only other group on Mgasin that had any technology at all. But they utilized it differently. They made it blend with the environment, used it to preserve or improve the life that they had always lived.

The two societies had been at war with each other for the past twenty Earth years. The war had been a cold one -- no action yet, but the possibility of total devastation. But in the past five years, threats on both sides had increased.

A lot of private companies outside of the Alliance had been monitoring the situation. A non-Alliance war meant profits for the arms and munitions industries. And then there were the terrorist factions, which looked at a hot war on a planet like Mgasin as a way of roping the Alliance into a role it didn't want -- that of choosing sides.

Finally, a year ago, the Alliance decided there had been too many close calls. It decided to broker a peace. For the past nine months, the only humans allowed on Mgasin were peacekeepers and diplomats. The worry was that all other humans would confuse the issue and possibly ignite the hostilities.

A Cuiesto, murdered by a human, could do just that.

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Bryer had elected to leave the body where it had fallen, in the thick brown grass of the Range. He was beginning to regret that decision.

If he could keep that body from being found, they all had a better chance of getting off Mgasin alive. The problem was, he didn't want to be caught with it at camp or anywhere near his equipment.

The Cuiesto, for all their show at being simple people, were anything but. They had elaborate tests for finding the slightest thing that didn't belong -- scents, genetic markers, a mere sliver of skin that would reveal someone's DNA. The Cuiesto could prove, beyond a doubt, that a person had been in an area six months after he left.

Bryer was always careful when he was in Cuiesto country, but this afternoon, he probably hadn't been careful enough. And he knew that, in addition to getting out of here, he had to cover his tracks.

The first thing he had to do was destroy the evidence of the murder. He sat deep inside the organizational tent, going over the digital. Nendre, always competent, had made copies of the day's work -- without viewing it, of course. Nendre had long ago stopped watching the events of a day's hunt. He found most

of it repetitive and uninteresting.

Bryer took the original disk and placed it in the machine. He was about to hit delete when the image appeared before him -- not a still holo at all, but moving, just as it had that afternoon.

The gracela exploded out of the brush, disappearing toward the west. Audra raced for a glider, but Bryer caught her arm.

"We don't hunt out of vehicles," he said.

_ "I do," she said._

He remembered the feeling he'd had then, the anger. She had signed an agreement. She understood that his safaris were a specific kind and he had his rules. He even explained them to her verbally: no hunting out of vehicles because it gave the humans an unfair advantage -- it was their job to outthink their prey, not simply to outrun it; no explosive weapons that would either destroy the prey or the nearby area; no contact with the natives; and a complete agreement to abide by the bagging limits set by Extreme Safari.

"This is why you exiled the woman?" Nendre spoke from behind him.

Bryer froze the holo and turned. He hadn't heard Nendre enter the tent. Nendre's eyes had moved forward, the stalks that hid behind the eyeballs completely visible. He examined the frozen hologram from all sides.

"She did something, hey? I knew her coldness would clash with yours."

"I thought you knew," Bryer said. "This was set to play."

"I heard the fighting outside. I decided to look. That was when you shut off the perimeter." Nendre pulled his eyes back and they went back into the center of his body. He folded two tentacles before him and wrapped the end filaments together, imitating the way Bryer templed his fingers when he was thinking. "You know she will die out there."

"That would be the best thing for all of us."

Nendre raised two other tentacles in surprise. "You freely admit to committing murder? You would make us all accomplices, then. I am not certain I wish to be one."

Bryer unfroze the holo.

A Cuiesto slid out of a youngling tree and glanced in their direction. His slender six feet height marked him as young himself. He turned toward them, the golden feathers covering his naked body glistening in the sunlight.

Bryer had thought the Cuiesto was looking directly at him, but it seemed now that Cuiesto was watching Audra. As if there might be recognition in his scarlet eyes.

He stretched, his tail tucking upwards against his spine. His crest rose, scarlet and gold to match his eyes and feathers, and then he poised to run after the gracela.

Audra turned her rifle on him.

"This is not possible," Nendre said.

Bryer grabbed her arm, but the whirl of the shot already echoed in the Range.

The yellow light of the laser was hard to see in the bright sunlight, but the results were clear: the shot left a hole in the Cuiesto's torso, and he fell forward into the brush.

Bryer snatched the rifle away from Audra, and she didn't seem to care. Instead she went to the Cuiesto, crouched over him, and grinned at them.

"He's dead," she said, removing her flaying knife. "Do I take my trophy here or wait until camp?"

Bryer froze the holo again. He couldn't look at the fight that ensued. All the markers they must have left, traces of themselves. He should have killed her there, left her, the digital, the rifle and the Cuiesto for one of the natives to find.

But he hadn't. He had taken her back against his own better judgement, and she had been angry at him for not allowing her to take her trophy.

Nendre was staring at the woman, crouched over the Cuiesto. The Cuiesto's crest was already wilting and his colors were fading. He would be nothing but bones and feathers come morning.

"What do you plan to do with this?" Nendre asked.

"You mean the holo or the women?" Bryer asked.

"All of it."

Bryer turned to his companion. He and Nendre had gone on a hundred trips in the past ten years, most of them illegal as Audra had charged, all of them extreme. He'd taken aliens from various parts of the sector, although his main clientele was human.

Most of the hunters were fine, interested in prey, interested in a trophy or two, interested in a grand adventure that would become the center story of their lives. A few were exceptionally cruel and needed great tending.

None had ever committed a crime like this.

"I'm getting rid of the digital and all the copies," Bryer said. "Then I'll worry about the others."

Nendre studied him, four more tentacles joining the first two. "Throw the original out with the woman."

Bryer started. He hadn't expected Nendre to help him. "I think it's better to destroy it."

Nendre waved his tentacles left and right, a gesture that mimicked the shaking of a human head. He'd learned it early in his association with Bryer, and humans always appreciated it.

"The Cuiesto will already know that we are here. Even if you had not left evidence of yourself in the Range, which I am sure you have, you shut off the perimeter. That will come up on someone's monitor. Then there is the matter of Runners."

Runners were the term the Cuiesto used for their young hunters. From the Cuiesto's fifteenth to twentieth years, they hit their speed spurt. It lasted no more than five years, sometimes less, and it was the only time they could successfully hunt gracela.

"What about Runners?" Bryer asked.

Nendre let his tentacles drop. "They always work in pairs."

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So time was even shorter than Bryer imagined. He kept the original as Nendre had urged him to do, but he destroyed the others. Then he began the shut-down procedure that would lead to the breakdown of camp.

He didn't like the idea of traveling in a Mgasin night, but he felt they had no choice. He had left the ship two hundred clicks from here, in a sea cave that was accessible only from the air.

If there had been a second Runner and he had gone to his people, then the Cuiesto were already looking for the hunting party. The perimeter kept them from being noticed on Cuiesto equipment, but if the Cuiesto had been searching when he tossed Audra out, then they would know his position.

He couldn't take that risk.

He covered himself with weaponry -- two laser pistols at his side, his laser rifle strapped against his back, and an old-fashioned hunting knife hidden in his boot. He also had over a hundred explosives, all smaller than his fingernail and powerful enough to destroy a village, tucked, along with the digital, in a pouch against his stomach.

No one was preventing him from getting out of this hellhole.

He left the organizational tent. Keely was waiting for him just outside the door, arms crossed, face fierce. "You said we could get Audra."

"Audra's dead," he said, "and if she's not, she will be soon."

"You can't just leave her here."

He stared at Keely. Was she going to be as much trouble as Audra? He had no idea how the other women felt about the afternoon's events.

"Yes," he said after a long moment. "I can just leave her here."

"I won't let you."

He made sure his smile was cold. "You can stay here with her if you like."

Keely flushed. She grabbed his arm with her strong hand and he looked down at it. If she didn't move, he would rip her hand free, and give her what she wanted: she would die here with Audra.

After a moment, she removed her hand and stepped aside. He walked past her.

Liv was eating a dinner she had cooked herself. The smell of roasted game made his stomach rumble. He grabbed a piece of meat off her plate and ate it as he walked to the glider.

He could feel both women looking at him. Nendre was probably watching too. None of them seemed to realize just how precarious this situation was.

Bryer could feel the time ticking away. Fortunately, he had designed his camps so that they could be broken apart quickly. The last thing to go would be the styroplatform and the perimeter. He pressed the computer controls near the glider's flank, finishing the shut-down.

The entire camp shook. Then he could hear snapping sounds as the interiors of the tents packed themselves. The packed bags traveled to their places in the glider as the tents folded in on themselves.

Liv let out a squeal of protest as her plate rose, dumping its contents in the recycler, and flew to its own packing crate. Her chair and table followed, folding themselves down to their traveling weight so that they went into the glider as well.

Keely kept her place on the styroplatform. Nendre stood beside her, all of his tentacles down. He seemed to be watching Bryer with great disappointment.

Bryer didn't care how they felt about him, so long as they got out of here alive.

He flicked on the glider's engines, felt the rush of warm air beneath it. Now he wished he had brought a glider built for speed, not one large enough to hold the equipment. He turned on the other two gliders as well, and punched the last of the computer controls, sending some of the equipment to the third glider. Normally, he and a client rode in the third glider, with the other clients in the second and Nendre with the equipment in the first. This time, he would have his own glider.

If need be, he would leave them all behind.

"You coming?" he said to them.

They stared at him, none of them moving.

"Because once the perimeter goes off, I get in the glider and take apart the styroplatform. You'll fall into the cutgrass and you'll no longer be my responsibility."

Liv walked toward him. Nendre shrugged all of his tentacles and followed, heading toward the first glider as he always did. Only Keely remained in place, staring at Bryer as if he had become some kind of monster.

Maybe he had. But his survival was at stake. A man had the right to do anything he could to survive.

The last of the equipment packed itself in the third glider. After he shut off the perimeter, he had to take the small generator apart by hand. It only took a few minutes, but during that time, he would be vulnerable.

Then he would pack it, get into his glider and go.

Nendre reached the first glider and, using his front tentacles, levered himself inside. Glider seats weren't built for his anatomy, but he managed, as he always did, to spread himself nearly flat and yet be able to reach the control.

With an unreadable glance, Liv passed Bryer and climbed into the second glider. She didn't even look at Keely.

Bryer shut off the perimeter.

The cutgrass glowed in the dying sun. The grass had its own luminescence, a quality that he had once enjoyed. This time, he saw it as a liability. Their presence would be obvious as dark spots against the blades.

He heard the rustle before he caught the movement. A laser rifle raised out of the grass like an arm waving for help.

"Audra!" Keely called, her voice full of triumph. "Bryer, you've got to -- "

The shot reached him, long and yellow, going in such perceptual slow motion that he actually believed he

could escape it. He leapt toward the third glider, his hand going to one of his own laser pistols, as the beam caught him in the left boot.

Heat seared through the rendisian leather, igniting the steel reinforced toe. He cursed, landed, and hit the disconnect on his boot. It pulled off his foot slowly, damaged by the blast.

So Audra was still alive. She was smarter than he had given her credit for. He had thought she would try to find a way out of the cutgrass, adding to her wounds and speeding up her death. Instead, she had remained in the same place, unmoving, until she saw the perimeter go off and the camp reveal itself.

Although that shot must have cost her. All of that movement would have resulted in more cuts on her skin.

Then he felt a muzzle against his back. Keely. Of course. She would help Audra.

He rolled into Keely, knocking her down, and removed her laser pistol from her hand. Then he pointed it at her chin.

"Stop being an idiot."

"Give me a glider," Keely said. "I'll get Audra out of here on my own."

He considered for a very brief moment. On the face of it, hers was a simple solution. Except that they'd meet him at the ship and he'd have to take them off planet.

He wasn't going to do anything else for Audra.

"No." He grabbed Keely's collar, pulling her up. Then, still crouching, he dragged her toward Nendre. Liv watched the entire thing as if it amused her.

Bryer knew that Audra could hear everything, and she could probably see them move beneath the gliders. But she was waiting for another clear shot. Too many movements, and she'd be too cut-up to shoot that rifle.

When Bryer reached Nendre's glider, he offered Keely up like a carcass. Nendre took her in four of his tentacles and held her against the glider. Then he wrapped a fifth tentacle around her neck.

"Try anything," he said, his voice sounding even more mechanical than usual, "and I will squeeze."

She glared at Bryer. He didn't care. She was the least of his problems.

He went back to the third glider, rose above it, and saw the darkness in the cutgrass. This time, Audra didn't shoot at him. But he knew that, like any good hunter, she was biding her time.

She wanted him inside the glider. She wanted to shoot him down so that she could use the glider to escape. If he was dead, she'd get off Mgasin. If he lived, she wouldn't.

They both knew that.

He wasn't leaving this place until she was no longer a threat. But it would take a risk on his part. Still, it would probably work. She didn't think him all that bright. She might fall for the trap.

Bryer moved around the glider, keeping his feet on the styroplatform. His left foot throbbed and his balance was off, but he wasn't willing to remove the right boot. He had reached the very edge of the platform, pistol at his side, finger at the ready.

He had made himself as perfect a target as he could.

Behind him, he heard a familiar click and whirr. He ducked just in time. The shot came over the center of the glider, disappearing into the darkness.

Liv. Liv had shot at him from behind.

He swung his pistol around, fired, hit the computer control on the back of Liv's glider, and saw it light up.

They had less than a minute.

Nendre, knowing what was going to happen, launched his glider off the platform. The glider, unbalanced by Keely's weight, tilted precariously toward one side.

But Bryer, still crouching, didn't watch Nendre. Instead, he searched the glowing cutgrass for the dark area that marked Audra's position. He found it right where he sensed it would be and fired. The shot went wild, severing a swath of cutgrass.

Liv was struggling with her glider. Its sides had sealed like they always did when someone tampered with the back controls, holding her inside. She couldn't get out, although she was trying to force the interior controls to let her.

Audra's rifle rose above the grass, and Bryer shot again. The beam hit her in the belly. Her body flew backwards, landing even deeper in the grass.

This time, he knew she was dead.

He only had a few seconds left. He dove into his own glider and hit reverse, going off the styroplatform backwards, away from Liv's glider. She was pounding against the clear walls, screaming at him, but he looked away.

The cutgrass was illuminating Nendre's glider from beneath. It looked odd, the shadows making the bottom seem uneven instead of flat. The glider was level now, and Bryer didn't see Keely's head against the sky. Nendre had probably let her fall into the cutgrass. She wasn't as resourceful as Audra. If the fall hadn't killed her, the grass would.

Bryer banked his own glider, heading toward the edge of the grass. At that moment, Liv's glider exploded, sending plumes of fire and light into the darkening sky.

If the Cuiesto didn't know where he was before, they knew now. He had to hurry. But first he had to make sure Nendre was all right.

Bryer eased his glider beside Nendre's, and gasped.

He was looking at the glider's flat bottom. The glider was flying upside down.

Bryer lowered his glider, so that he could see underneath Nendre's. Bryer hoped to find Nendre clinging by his tentacles.

But Nendre wasn't there -- and neither was Keely.

The glider was empty.

Bryer looked down. Nendre was flat against the cutgrass, his body deflated the way his people's bodies did when they were dead. A few meters behind him, Keely lay broken in the grass.

They must have struggled, upset the glider, and fallen to the grass below.

Bryer cursed. He and Nendre had been together a long time, working well despite their differing philosophies. They had been friends.

He hadn't meant to get Nendre killed.

Although Bryer couldn't do anything about it now. Nendre was dead, but Bryer wasn't. And he still had time to get out of this godforsaken place. He nudged the glider forward when he noticed something odd at the edge of the Range.

Runners, dozens of them, stood in front of him, holding a weapon he recognized as cross between a laser rifle and an old fashioned projectile gun.

He turned, saw shapes in the darkness all around the cutgrass. His glider's scanner confirmed what his eyes took in: hundreds of Runners, some visible, some not, waiting for him. He couldn't fly away from this. Even if he tried, they'd keep up with the glider. If they fired at him, those weapons would do serious damage because his glider was not armor plated.

Bryer hovered, safe as long as he was above the cutgrass. No Runner could venture inside -- and they wouldn't shoot until they were sure he had seen him. Unlike Audra, the Cuiesto had ethics.

He had one chance. He fingered the explosives he had stored in his pouch. If he used them, he would be able to get away. He would probably make it to the ship and off Mgasin.

But he would leave behind hundreds of dead Runners and the first volley in a two-pronged war. The uneasy truce between the Viotu and the Cuiesto would end, and no human could broker a peace. In fact, the war would probably spread to the Alliance, since humans would have been the trigger -- the spark that made the cold war hot all over again.

It was just what the terrorist factions wanted. They wanted to destroy the Alliance by involving it in a war that would divide the member nations. Such a war would show that the Alliance only talked about peace.

Audra had known about the dangers of coming to Mgasin illegally. In fact, Bryer had explained them to her before the trip. But as he had spoken, she had watched him with faint amusement, amusement he had taken for contempt at the rules.

It had been contempt at the information.

He finally understood what he should have seen all along.

She hadn't been here to hunt gracela. She had come here to start a war.

She was a terrorist, the Mgasin equivalent of a suicide bomber, whose desperate act had a small probability of survival. Even if he hadn't killed her, the Cuiesto would have -- after she had told them lies about human involvement in a war the Alliance didn't even know they were going to be part of.

His hand left the explosives. Instead, he fingered the digital in his pouch -- the digital he had nearly destroyed. As it existed now, it could be what he wanted it to be. Audra wasn't alive to explain her motivations. He could use the digital to show Audra hadn't meant to start a war -- only that she was mean-spirited and selfish, a hunter who didn't understand the sanctity of sentient life.

But he did. He always had.

And if he killed the Runners just so that he could escape, he would be no better than Audra. In fact, he would be her pawn for the rest of his miserable life.

Bryer cursed softly to himself. He was guilty. Guilty of coming to Mgasin illegally. Guilty of so many tiny things. He had never thought that such small guilts could have such huge repercussions.

Strange that he always considered himself a moral man. Stranger still to discover here, in this place, that he had never acted like one.

It was time to start.

He raised his hands and, in broken Cuiesto, surrendered.

Everything.

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