

HUNTER

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PYKE CHASED THE GIRL DOWN A STREET STILL WET WITH THE AFTERNOON'S RAINFALL. A THIN SLIVER OF MOON GLOWED BEHIND THE THINNING CLOUDS, BUT IT WASN'T BRIGHT ENOUGH TO PIERCE THE DARKNESS SURROUNDING THE FEW STREET LAMPS THAT STILL WORKED. THE GIRL WAS FAST. HE HAD TO STAY CLOSE, OR SHE'D ESCAPE.

Pyke had let the girl put about 500 feet between them when she ran through a bright pool of light and was swallowed by darkness. When she didn't reappear, Pyke knew he had her, for there was only one place she could have gone. He followed her through a once-ornate gateway into the old city, where the colony had been founded a century before.

Her footfalls echoed off rows of empty windows down narrow streets that seemed to turn back on themselves, an ancient trick intended to confuse invaders. When the Gan arrived, they solved this puzzle by bombarding most of the buildings and walls from low orbit until there weren't many places left to hide. Hunters like Pyke—a second-generation Goa colonist who'd grown up in the old city—knew every twist, every turn, every blind alley and every hidden basement.

It wasn't the first time Pyke had pushed a rebel into the avenues. In the six months he'd been working for the Gan, he'd let dozens of terrified patriots think they were making their escape into the old city's maze-like streets, only to trap them in one of its countless dead ends. Then he'd have a little fun before turning them over to his masters.

He heard a splash just down the block, followed by a yelp. *She must have fallen in a puddle*, Pyke thought. Shallow craters were everywhere in these streets; filled with water, they made quite effective traps. Pyke slowed to a jog and grinned. It was only a matter of time now.

There she was, just ahead. She was limping down a sidewalk, using a waist-high fence along the front of a building as an improvised crutch.

"Hey," he called out to her, with mock concern, "where are you going to go?"

She looked over her left shoulder as she reached the end of the fence and turned down a side street. "Fuck you, appeaser," she spat at him. "If you're going to give me to the sodding Gan, come and get me. You fucking traitor."

She had spirit for him to break. He liked that. He also knew that she'd just turned into an alley that ended in a brick wall. *It is all over but the screaming*, he thought, slowing to a deliberate walk.

His heart pounded as he took deep breaths, the adrenaline of the chase beginning to ebb. He wiped sweat from his brow, and pulled his hair back from his face with trembling fingers.

Her back was to him as he entered the alley. She looked frantically toward the buildings for some escape, but the windows were boarded up or out of reach, and all the stairs had been pulled down as scrap metal years ago.

"Look, I hate the Gan as much as you do," Pyke said smoothly.

This was true; he despised them. Indeed, like most of the former residents of the old city, he'd welcomed their arrival. When it became clear that they hadn't actually come in peace, and were only there to hunt and harvest whoever they could, he'd fought against them as fiercely as anyone. But the old model of warfare, where enemies could be forced to negotiate for peace by breaking their will—by making the cost of losses too great to bear—simply didn't apply to the Gan. Attempts to reason with them were equally, gruesomely unsuccessful. There appeared to be an endless supply of Gan; for every one killed, two arrived to take its place. One year after the first Gan Cruiser arrived and 49 weeks after the attacks began, Earth still hadn't sent any additional defense forces, and it was beginning to look like they never would. Rumors whispered that Earth got hit harder and faster than Goa. Pyke believed the war would eventually end ... when the colonists surrendered, or were wiped out. Six months ago, he decided to work for the winning side. He was ordered to roam the old city, identifying and reporting pockets of resistance, and to capture as many resistance fighters as possible.

She spun around and looked at him. "So why are you helping them?"

"Because I'm a pragmatist."

He advanced slowly. He expected her to recoil with fear, beg him for mercy, and offer him whatever he wanted to let her escape, like all the others. He was already growing excited at the prospect. But if she just stared at him, jaw set and mouth tightly closed. Her shoulders weren't tense; her limbs weren't shaking.

As he closed the distance between them, he really *saw* her for the first time: late teens, dirty brown hair, smooth white skin. She wore loose-fitting pants and a light jacket.

"My name is Nina," she said. "I want you to know that."

He stopped and looked at her. "Okay..." he chuckled. He pulled a sap from his pocket and lifted it. "I'll be sure to remember that. My name is Py—"

She took a small step toward him. Light fell across her face, revealing bright red lips, a small silver stud in her nose, and solid black eyes.

Her voice came from inside his head, like a memory. ::You're Pyke. We know who you are, and we've been looking for you for a long time. You've hurt a lot of innocent people, and now you're going to die, you Ganfucking pile of shit::

Pyke tightened his grip on the sap with a hand that suddenly felt cold. "That's a pretty neat trick," he said, mustering what felt like false bravado. *What the hell was happening? He was in control! He had her trapped!*

::Are you sure about that? It kind of seems like you're the one who's trapped.:: Her voice was loud and clear, though her lips – the pretty red lips he had such plans for – did not move.

Pyke punched his head. "I don't know how you're doing that, but you'd better stop it."

::Oh, I don't think so. I think I'm going to stay right here.:: —and Pyke felt her poke his temple twice, hard, though she never moved— ::and talk with you for quite a while longer.::

Pyke didn't know what the hell was going on, but some primal

instinct told him that just standing there wasn't in his best interests. His fight-or-flight reflexes fought to take control of his body.

::Tough choice, isn't it? Maybe you're close enough to grab and kill me before I kill you. Maybe you can run away. But what if I've already called my sisters and they're standing ... just ... behind ... you?::

"Your sisters? Who the fuck are you?"

::We're the ones fighting for the people you betrayed.:: Pyke's sap clattered to the ground at his feet and Pyke discovered he couldn't move.

::And I'm the last person you will ever try to hurt.::

For the first time since he surrendered to a Gan patrol six months ago, Pyke was afraid. Hell, he was more than afraid: he was terrified. He couldn't believe it, but there it was: he was more terrified of this small teenage girl with the strange black eyes than he was of the towering alien Gan.

"Y— you'd better let me go," he said.

Her eyes stayed fixed on his, and her mouth did not open, but he heard her laughter – a mocking, girlish giggle – as clearly as he had heard her voice.

::So you can tell your masters that the Psykers are here, and the Gan's days are numbered? That isn't going to happen, Pyke.::

"What are y—"

::I'm going to leave you here, alone, to die. But before I do, I'm going to show you a few things.::

A small burst of crackling blue energy leapt from her body to his, as quick and bright as a spark of static electricity

::We know, Pyke. We know everything that you did ... and now, so will you.::

She reached into his memory, ripped out the identity of every man and woman he'd captured and betrayed, and forced him to see their faces. He heard their names, their own voices, come out of his mouth as they pled for mercy. He saw himself through their eyes, saw his own lusty, grinning, hateful face, as he tortured and assaulted them.

The first was a man named Petir. Pyke had chosen him because he was older and—although he was a brilliant tactician and fiery speaker—his body was weak. Pyke watched Petir kiss his wife and son goodbye, followed him down the hill into the pedestrian transitway, and murdered him in the dark. He hadn't meant to kill him, but since it was the first time he'd hit another human being, fear of discovery had made him, as he told his Gan masters later, "a little too enthusiastic."

Pyke felt the pain of the metal pipe he used on Petir. He saw the flash of light behind Petir's eyes, heard the sound of the impact, and felt his scalp tear open. Nina took him inside Petir's fear and confusion. Was he being mugged? "Please, take my money. Just don't hur—" The words were cut off by a second blow. Pyke felt his skull crack. Trapped in Petir's mind, Pyke screamed along with his victim. Then, as his vision faded and his life slipped away, Nina showed him Petir's final thought: *I love you, Anton. Take good care of your mama for me.*

Pyke trembled, as the blackness of Petir's death faded into the dim light of the alley. He was faintly aware of having pissed himself. Pyke had no family and very few friends, but he felt the loss of a wife and child he'd never met as profoundly as they felt the loss of their husband and father. Nina's black eyes were rimmed in a faint, pulsing violet glow.

::Your Gan Master wasn't happy that a resistance leader, possibly a valuable source of intel, had been killed instead of captured. You were more careful with your second target. Do you remember her? Do you remember how you walked around the lake and made friendly small talk about the weather?::

Pyke saw himself dressed in a heavy sweater and woolen hat. He saw his breath form little clouds as he talked, smiling, about the unseasonably cold weather. He heard the girl's hope that this nice and handsome boy would ask her on a date. He felt himself blush.

Nina's voice was cold and came from everywhere at once. *::Do you even remember her name?::*

Pyke couldn't have answered, even if he did remember. He felt motion sick and disoriented, like he was in two places at once.

::Of course you don't.::

Nina put Pyke into the girl's mind as he grabbed her from behind, threw a black hood over her head, and dragged her beneath a bridge. Pyke began to cry, just as she did, begging him not to hurt her. The hood was rough, and scratched her nose and chin.

::Her name was Zara, Pyke. She was twenty-three.::

Beneath the darkness of the hood, snot ran out of Zara's nose and tears spilled down her cheeks as she cried. She heard the heavy shuffling of clawed feet on the gravel. Her blood and his ran cold when she smelled the stink of the Gan's hot breath as it leaned in close to her and spoke to Pyke. She felt its three-fingered claw bruise her arm as it dragged her away to a Gan Cruiser.

Pyke tried to cry out to his captors that he knew nothing, tried to beg them for mercy, but Nina held him fast in Zara's memory. The hood was pulled from his head, revealing a bright white room. Several Gan formed a semicircle around him. Their eyestalks bent toward him, unblinking and hateful. The closest opened its foremouth and blasted a high-pitched scream that ruptured his right eardrum. Pyke threw up, splashing vomit all over the creature's carapace. Enraged, the Gan brought one of its impossibly long, multi-jointed arms down on him, knocking him to the ground. Pyke cracked his head against the floor, and warm blood spread out on the cold bright floor against the side of his face.

As his vision swam, Pyke heard clawed feet that clacked and scraped as they moved aside, revealing a type of Gan he had never seen before. It was tall and covered in short fur. Its small, smooth, head was covered with dozens of tiny red eyes that blinked seemingly at random. It didn't appear to have a mouth.

As it skittered across the room toward him, Pyke shook his head clear and realized that what he thought was fur was actually short spines, like the bristles on a brush.

The spiny Gan filled his field of vision, and then morphed into the Psyker girl.

::Tell them what they want to know.::

Pyke was surprised to discover that he could speak. He was even more surprised to hear Zara's terrified, pleading voice come out of his mouth. "But I don't know anything!"

::And neither did Zara.::

Everything rippled, like his reality was the surface of a pond on a windy day, and then the girl was gone, replaced by the Gan. Time had passed, but he couldn't tell how much. He was stripped naked now, and suspended above the floor by an invisible force. The spiny Gan reared up in front of him, fluffed out its quills, and wrapped its arms around him. He was pierced—not the quick pinch of a needle, but the fiery shock of a scorpion's sting, thousands of times, all over his body. He screamed in agony before neurotoxins flooded into his brain and paralyzed him.

For days, he hung there, unable to move, as the Gan embraced him, over and over. He welcomed death when it finally came.

::You did this to them, you coward!:: Nina spat at him, her voice cold and booming over the psychic replay in his mind. Countless times, he saw, felt, heard, smelled, and tasted his brutality through the eyes of others — men and women, young and old, strong and weak. Each one was different. Pyke visualized and heard and felt and *remembered* each one more vividly than the last, a cascade of pain and terror.

In the prison of Pyke's mind, he suffered six months of torment and died dozens of deaths. When Nina finally released him, only a minute after she had started, he collapsed to the ground, shivering and drooling.

Small sounds came out of his mouth. "S ... s ... suh ... suh ..."

Nina crouched down close to him.

::What?::

His voice was barely louder than a whisper. “I’m ... suh ... sorry.”

“Yes,” Nina whispered, “you are.” She stood up, spat on him, and stepped around him.

::Pentat:: Nina 'cast, ::It's done. I'm coming in.::

She strode out of the alley into the war-ravaged streets. Beyond the walls of the old city, plasma bolts flashed against the bottom of the clouds. The rain began to fall again, pooling in Pyke’s unblinking eyes and spilling down his cheeks.

Credits:

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