

# **They Work Harder**

**by H. W. Moss**

“They work harder, they work longer, they eat less and best of all, they don’t TALK BACK because they don’t THINK!”

The auctioneer’s hype gripped the audience and grabbed the attention of several off-worlders sitting on the patio of a nearby café, including Jacobi, who leaned forward and sat higher on his stool to get a better view of the creature being sold. It looked human enough if you overlooked the elephant ears and orange skin. Several more of its kind waited patiently with serene smiles for their turn under the laser.

“What am I bid for this fine Mintari specimen, a male with a good strong back and an excellent disposition?”

A number of voices rang out in unison and the bidding quickly rose to three thousand credits. The auctioneer seemed pleased with himself. The bidding slowed. An overdressed Cadan raised a mitten. The laser pointer focused on the Cadan and made a gavel-like smacking sound which signaled an end to the bidding. “Sold to the farmer in the front row for three thousand three hundred credits!”

Ill-concealed laughter erupted from some of the gathered buyers. The locals could tell the citizen wore a garb-band to disguise his caste, but the barker had seen straight through to his true identity. The Cadan was undoubtedly a wealthy country rube way out of his league in the big city who may have come to town to buy farm tools or purchase next year’s crop seeds. It looked as if he would leave with a chattel field hand.

The auctioneer wasted no time bringing the next one on the block. “What am I bid for this female entering her 19<sup>th</sup> year, the fecund season for her species. Am I bid a thousand? I see a thousand and two. You, sir, are you bidding or picking at a radiation scab?”

Slavery was illegal in all sectors, but that did not put an end to the practice. Furthermore, the definition of what was livestock and what wasn't remained a fuzzy line in the DNA lounge act of life. Jacobi bit into his meatlike sandwich and swallowed.

“Three, a thousand and three. Come on, all you sentient people! Get your credit chits out! This female will outlast you in any endeavor whether you put her at the helm of a field plow or take her off planet as your astral navigator. They learn quick and they're tougher than a Duro Blaster 433's dual alloy hull! You might not know it, but this subspecies has only recently been classified. They were so quiet on their homeworld, they went undiscovered for decades. And best of all, they don't think, they just do what they're told! What starship captain could ask for more from a deck hand?”

The animals waiting on the auction block looked nowhere near as capable as claimed, Jacobi thought. They were slight of build, thin wisps compared to every other species in attendance, with rather large round eyes and big nostrils. That Cadan farmer should have known better; he may well have bought a pig in a poke.

None of the governments of the Confederation were allowed to legally trade in a species which might some day earn the right to a planet of their own. But old habits die hard and more than a few empires were founded on the backs of captured enemies. So, even if the price of joining the Confederation was to outlaw and denounce the practice, it

was an open secret that slave markets existed on many planets. Jacobi had stumbled on more than one during the course of his interstellar voyages.

The cadence of the sale picked up.

“I see nineteen hundred. Am I bid more? Remember, Mintaris are not like you and me,” the auctioneer’s patter continued unabated. “They are more like robots made of flesh, mechanical in every respect except they have organs like you,” he pointed to a Flinglatt in the front row, “and like you,” this time a Trann, “and me,” what passed for an opposable thumb flattened firmly against a mushroom growing like an extra proboscis in the center of his chest. “Do I hear two thousand?”

Jacobi found the idea of selling anything that walked and talked more than distasteful, it was repugnant. But it was hard to buck a system when you were the only human at the party. He had no interest in acquiring a Mintari, since Jacobi traveled alone, but on rare occasions when he absolutely had to have a crew, he believed you paid your employees, you didn’t own them like a pet. Furthermore, he couldn’t tell if the Mint on the block was really a female or a male, seriously doubted if the pitchman could either. At this age, the species was flat chested and appeared sexually indistinguishable from one another. Perhaps that changed after puberty.

As it became clear the bidding had probably reached its zenith, the auctioneer became frenetic in his attempt to squeeze one more credit from his audience. “Do I hear two-three? Do I have another bid?”

Jacobi lost interest in the process and turned to his com set. He pushed a button, connected with the shop. “Tony? Jack. You gonna get me off this gravity hole today or

not? What? That's ridiculous! Oh, all right. Tomorrow, then. I'll find a room and a bottle of When to put me to sleep. But you better have that part installed early. Am I getting through to you? Yes. A nice one to you too. Goodbye."

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The bottle of Ugarian When did not work as planned. Jacobi was an insomniac in the best of circumstances, but being planet bound made it worse. Unable to sleep, he finally gave up and stumbled downstairs to the lobby. Cranky and bleary eyed, he turned right and walked into the first All Night club he could find. It was dark and near empty. He ordered a Scotch, neat. The barman looked at him with a blank expression.

"Fine. A When then." Drink in hand, he wandered over to the Pincer table where five gamblers were in a high stakes game: The credit lights at each player's hand were in the red. This was Jacobis' idea of a good time.

"You gentlemen mind if I sit in a round or two?" He pulled his own credit manager out of a breast pocket and took a seat without rebuke. As the round in play came to a close, he surveyed his opponents. He recognized the Stendtt opposite from a deal he'd done last year. Two Tardans seated next to one another, obviously from the same creche, nodded in his direction. The Flaron was unreadable, but Jacobi was mildly surprised when he realized the fifth player was the Cadan farmer from the auction. The Cadan no longer wore the garb-band and looked in real life like a hard working stiff who was again out of his league at a Pincer table. He was losing big. The Flaron raked in his winnings, his tally showing him to be the evening's table champ.

For the moment, Jacobi thought.

In the first hand, Jacobi looked at his draw and knew better than to waste money. Fold. The others continued playing. Bets were placed and the Cadan grinned confidently when he was called. He showed his hand, then let out an audible gasp when he realized his Pinch was merely one point below that of the Flaron.

The second time he played, Jacobi drew three, had to work hard to contain his smile as he studied a natural high re-pinch. He wasn't sure the others could read human lips, but he took no chances. Time to jack up the bet.

Jacobi won the next three hands straight and, by then, it was looking pretty grim for the Cadan. The guy probably got off his farm once a year and this was it. He'd leave town a poorer but wiser dirt digger. "Two hundred credits," the Flaron began with a reasonably high number. Nobody folded as the pot grew. By the time it reached the Cadan, he acted like a dust devil unable to pick a direction. Then, with a flair Jacobi had to admire, the farmer turned his credit manager upside down on the table and said, "I have a certain valuable commodity to place as a wager instead of actual credits. You will, I trust, accept my pink slip for a male Mintari I purchased today? I paid 3,300 for him this afternoon. He's worth much more, of course, certainly half that. I'm raising the bet to 1,500 using him as collateral. Here's my script," and he dropped a small pink card onto the center of the table.

"Well, I dunno," the Flaron started to say. The Tardans tilted eye-stalks in his direction. Here was a chance to pick up a fresh woo worker at half price. The Flaron muttered, "I guess it's all right with me. How about you, Earth man?"

Jacobi smiled wryly. He pressed an equivalent amount of credits forward. “You’re called.” Everyone met the final bet. “Pot square?” Jacobi lay down a Cameo and the entire table cursed him in their own language including the farmer.

The Cadan was busted and immediately dropped out. Jacobi played an hour longer. He won a hand or two, lost several. He didn’t think much about the pink slip lying under his credit manager until he started to leave. Waiting for him at the door of the All Night in the dim pre-dawn light was an orange skinned floppy-eared waif who looked tired and hungry.

“Damn,” Jacobi muttered. “What the hell are you doing here?”

The answer astonished Jacobi: “My former master told me to stand in this spot for you. He said you are my new owner and I am to perform your tasks now.”

“Yah, well I’m not used to having anyone perform for me.”

There was no response to this declaration. Jacobi thought for a second that perhaps the off-world creature did not realize a reply was implied. Then it hit him. “You really don’t think for yourself, do you?”

“No, sir.”

“I can’t believe the guy at the auction was correct. You really are like some mechanical thing? You respond to commands and answer questions, but unless I ask you to do something, you just hang around where I last put you, like your old master did. Is that true?”

“That is accurate, sir.”

“But you’re real polite.” No response.

“Okay,” Jacobi started walking toward his digs. “Come with me.” The creature followed a few paces behind. “Look, you got a name? Well, then, Yarico, when’s the last time you had a meal? Yesterday! Let’s get you fed. And you can take a shower in my room -- phew, Lord knows you need one. Meanwhile, I gotta see a man about a space ship. You only rent When. Hey, you sure you wouldn’t just rather be set free?”

The response to this question was immediate and energetic. The Mint shuddered and his eyes went wide. He shook his head vehemently no. Probably frightened at the prospect of being left alone on an unfamiliar planet with no way to get home, Jacobi thought.

Jacobi had to admit he could use a little help with the next cargo he was due to pick up in two weeks. Fine. I’ll find out where this guy came from and drop him off at the nearest shuttle run. Maybe give him some spending cash to take home. That would be the humane thing to do.

He connected with Tony. “Be there in an hour, pal. I know it’s early! You said today, I said early today. See ya.”

The Mint never crowded him, kept a measured distance behind Jacobi all the way through checkout at the hotel. As instructed, he strapped into the co-pilot seat and smiled broadly as the slingshot hook hoisted The Argon into near planet orbit.

This guy’s having the time of his life, Jacobi thought as he punched buttons and checked readings before beginning a final count down. The Mintari exhibited none of the

usual signs of apprehension most grounders had when about to launch into deep space. Wish I was as slap happy stupid, Jacobi said to himself.

The Argon's engines hummed like well tuned violins. Then, with a flick of a switch, the small freighter burst into life and shot them a thousand miles away from the planet in half a second.

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The first hint of trouble was a massive explosion that, by rights, should have blown them both into shredded pieces of sushi.

“Tony, you lying piece of crocok dung! When I get my hands on you . . .” The promised revenge would have to wait. Jacobi was without helm control and realized The Argon had begun systematically shutting down functions and sealing off leaks.

Not quite the first sign of a heart attack, which nine times out of ten is death. He had a few moments to find a planet, plot a course, grab his life safety gear and suggest, no, command Yarico do the same. He snapped the lid closed on his pod knowing full well he might never wake from this induced sleep. No wonder he was an insomniac. What causes your insomnia? I can't sleep at night!

The Argon found the planet and landed in one piece, but it would never leave again. Jacobi was glad he had not been awake for the ordeal. He made a quick power check only to find all systems completely off line. The air was already getting stale. He ran up and down the band widths of the communication system, nothing. In a fit of pique, he pulled his personal com unit out of his pocket and punched the emergency distress number. He said hello three times before folding it up again.

There was evidence of a ragged atmospheric entry and an equally rough and tumble touchdown. Numerous bruises covered his body and Jacobi could feel strained muscles and aches deep down to his bones. Even from inside The Argon, his pod must have taken a beating. He sat still for a moment to gather his wits.

Meanwhile, the Mintari stood blissfully quiet beside him, not a worried bead of sweat on his brow.

“Yarico, you can start unloading the camping equipment. Looks like we’re in for an extended visit.” Jacobi broke open the air lock, began to clamber out, thought better of it. He backed up and said, “You first.”

The Mintari took this in stride. He dutifully shouldered a canister that would have knocked Jacobi to his knees in what he judged to be a gee and a half of Earth’s gravity. Yarico nimbly climbed down the hand rungs and let go to drop two meters and a half. He found firm footing on what appeared to be a leafy jungle floor and looked up at Jacobi who yelled, “Catch!” Five more containers followed in quick succession. Then Jacobi shut and locked The Argon’s airlock for the last time, dangled and dropped down to join Yarico.

The ship had not come to its resting place with ease. Its flight path was clearly marked by torn vegetation and a long furrow gouged in the earth, but the jungle canopy above had sealed up behind them. There was no trace of their passage through the branches and no way they could be seen from the air -- if anyone came looking. All the plant life in the immediate surroundings was matted down as if The Argon had pitched and rolled after

coming to a full stop. The good news, Jacobi thought, was this had created a nice little camp ground.

“Sure going to miss you,” Jacobi said looking back up at his vessel with a twinge. “Sure glad you’re fully insured.” Even on Yarico’s shoulders it would be impossible to re-enter without a means of reaching the hand rungs. A ladder. He could cut branches and lash them together with vines. Do that later.

In the mean time, he fished an emergency guidance beacon from one of the suitcases at his feet, set it up and turned it on. “Okay, here’s the deal. We will only be picked up if we’re near this homing device when help arrives. I’ve been stranded before and it might be no picnic but it doesn’t have to be painful either. Last time we made it out in less than a week. True, we were on a regular merchant route. Don’t know where in hell exactly we are now, but we set up camp here rather than try and hike somewhere. Got it? We dig a latrine, we live off our stores and sleep in a tent.”

He half expected this to be enough information, but the Mintari stared straight at him, eyes unblinking. “Right. Okay, Yarico, start breaking out the equipment. Find the tent. Set it up over there. I’ll deal with the cooking gear. Now.”

Daylight was waning when they sat down to their first meal. Jacobi managed to investigate their environment for ten meters in all directions, found no signs of other inhabitants. Tomorrow he would begin looking for any indigenous people, see if he could locate a community, if one existed, and hoped they would have an advanced civilization. Somehow, he doubted he would be so lucky. He was tired and sore and not in any mood

for idle conversation. He had done more hard labor in the last few hours than he could remember having done since his last asteroid collision. He would sleep well for a change.

“I’m packing it in, Yarico, but we do this in rotation. One of us has to stay awake at all times during the night. Give me four hours and wake me. I’ll spell you for four hours. Hopefully, the sun will be up by then. Here’s a handgun. Know how to use it? Good. Now keep your eyes and those big floppy ears of yours peeled. We don’t know what hungry predators might be looking for a meal.”

As he spoke, the volume of animal sounds increased around them. He would much rather be inside The Argon, even with the door wide open. Got to build a ladder first thing in the morning, he reminded himself.

As a caution against inviting unwanted guests, Jacobi turned off the camp light and doused the fire before he crawled into the light weight pup tent. He pulled off his clothes and was mildly pleased to find the sleeping bag as comfortable as the bed in his last hotel. Before dropping off, he shouted to his companion, “Remember, Yarico, if there’s any trouble it’s up to you to save my ass.”

He was sure he had just closed his eyes when he felt a nagging tug drag him out of a deep sleep. “Four hours. I said I get four . . . “

An orange hand covered his mouth before he could voice more outrage. Yarico leaned in closer and whispered firmly in his ear, “You must be quiet. We are being approached by a Dranoc hunting party.”

The hand withdrew. Jacobi remained silent and listened intently to the jungle noises. There were none. That was a bad sign. He twisted his head to look past the tent flaps,

peered into the darkness. Suddenly, a beam of light broke through the surrounding foliage, glimmered briefly as if moving, then was extinguished.

“How the hell do you know its Dranocs?” Jacobi asked while pulling on his pants.

“I can smell them,” was the surprising reply.

Jacobi was outside the tent in an instant. He pulled on his pants, snapped velcro tabs together on his shirt, started stuffing feet into boots. His eyes were adjusted to the dark, but starlight was the only source of radiance. He could not penetrate the jungle. A twig snapped. If they were Dranoc, Jacobi knew he and Yarico were in deep trouble. Dranoc were the most feared non-allied civilization known in explored space. They ranged far and wide in search of mineral and energy sources they plundered for their home planet. Fiercely independent, they had little regard for other life forms which they looked upon as trespassers, not the rightful owners, of any planet the Dranoc claimed.

Although it was apocryphal, Jacobi had heard that Dranoc preferred to eat another species they encountered rather than negotiate or talk. Before he had time to mull over this gloomy prospect, he found Yarico standing beside him wearing a puppy dog expression.

For a moment, Jacobi believed the Mintari approached in anticipation of receiving new orders. Instead, Yarico literally hoisted Jacobi off the ground and tossed him over his shoulder with the same ease Jacobi would have exerted on a human child. Yarico took off at a run in the opposite direction from the light source.

The Mintari was remarkably sure footed and appeared to be able to see in the dark. He leaped fallen logs invisible to Jacobi who could barely believe what was happening to

him. Yarico found an animal trail, followed it for a hundred meters, changed direction and loped along a path of his own making at an equally steady pace for another hundred. He ducked low hanging vines and made a swathe through the dense undergrowth without need of a blade. Where the vegetation was particularly thick, he merely swiveled his slender waist between tree trunks and popped out the other side with Jacobi on his back. Huge leaves and stiff branches slapped Jacobi's butt as he was carried none too gently further and further away from the threat at a pace much faster than he could have possibly run. The Mintari must have put a kilometer between themselves and the Dranoc before he finally stopped to catch his breath.

Yarico put Jacobi down, inhaled deeply five times, made a quick study of their surroundings and sniffed the air long and loudly. Jacobi was equally worn out from the fast, bumpy ride. But before he could gather wind enough to speak, the Mintari again grabbed the astonished earth man and tossed him over his shoulder like a sack of crocodile dung. Yarico changed direction and took off running.

Another incredibly sustained sprint lasting a dozen minutes ensued. When at last they halted, Jacobi could hear the sound of roaring water. They must be near a waterfall which means a river, he thought. Now how the hell could Yarico have known that was here?

He had no opportunity to ask as, one more time, he was carried aloft and carted away.

Yarico seemed unfailing in his ability to know exactly where he was taking Jacobi. They did, indeed, come to a swollen river, its black expanse incomprehensibly wide and dangerous. Jacobi knew it would be impossible to cross. Without a word, Yarico set

Jacobi on his feet, pointed at the rushing water and indicated they would attempt to reach the far bank.

“How? On your back?”

“Yes,” the Mintari said. “No more speech.”

“Hey, we must be three kilometers away, for crying out loud. The Dranoc can’t possibly know where we are. Can they?”

“They are hunters. They can. They will find us if you are not silent.”

Yarico waded into the river and waited. He stooped over in a pose that left little to Jacobi’s imagination. All right, he thought, what the heck could be worse than drowning on some god forsaken planet? The alternative was to become the main course at a Dranoc dinner party. He climbed Yarico’s back.

They fell forward and Yarico began a strong, steady breast stroke. Half way across, Jacobi feared the Mintari might lose power and they would be cast downstream. But Yarico seemed to draw from the same incredibly powerful inner strength that propelled them through the jungle. Eventually, the remarkable fellow landed them both safely on the other side. True, they had drifted a number of meters below their point of origin, a consequence of the strong current, but Yarico seemed to think they were now, finally, out of harm’s way.

The Mintari lay panting on his back beside the river while Jacobi paced nearby. He was more astounded by what had just happened than he was frightened of being discovered. He noticed Yarico still wore the side arm. That was good. At least they had a weapon.

At last Yarico rolled over on his side and looked up at Jacobi.

“What?” the Earth man asked. “Do you think I owe you a debt of gratitude? And would you mind telling me what just happened? How did you know how to find a river? How come you didn’t think we could have talked our way into getting help from whoever was coming toward us through the jungle? For that matter, how did you know for certain those were Dranoc coming at us?”

“Which question do you want me to answer first?”

Jacobi was not put off by the response as his mind focused on what he was dealing with here. The supposedly docile automaton had demonstrated incredible strength and endurance, but it still looked up at him with childlike trust. Jacobi was under the impression it would only carry out his bidding, do what it was told, yet it looked as if it had developed a few independent thoughts. “How did you know where to find the river?”

“I smelled the water.”

“You can smell water? Water doesn’t have an odor. How could you track something that far away from our camp with your nose?”

“Answer to your first question: yes. Answer to your second: I could not at first. I was too occupied preparing our accommodations. And your body has an overpowering fragrance. I learned of the river’s proximity to us only after you retired for the night.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You didn’t ask.”

Jacobi was tired of this question and answer game. He wished Yarico would be more forthright and volunteer information on his own. But that seemed a distant dream. Their predicament rose foremost in his mind.

“You could tell those were Dranoc because you could smell them too?”

“If that is a question, I will answer: You are correct. They have a distinctive fragrance as well. It is quite fulsome.”

“Can they find us?” Jacobi was afraid of what the answer might be.

“Yes.”

“Can we hide from them?”

“Temporarily.”

“Okay, Yarico. Where?”

“Beneath the falls. A few clicks up river.” The Mintari seemed to have rested enough. He rose and began trudging upstream along the riverbank

It was unclear to Jacobi why the Dranoc might not be able to find them right away simply because they took refuge at the falls. The Dranoc were, after all, fully equipped trackers. He asked Yarico why he believed this was the case.

“Dranoc hunt by night. They evolved without an instinct for the hunt during the day. And for all the modern tools at their disposal, they prefer to use basic skills. It adds to the thrill. However, they are not above using high powered weapons to kill at great distance. Remember, we are nothing more than a diversion for them. They are here on other business. Therefore, we must be on the move when they seek us, rest when they do not.”

Jacobi contemplated these answers, tried to refrain from asking more questions, but failed. “What’s the falls got to do with it?”

“It is not so much the falls themselves” Yarico said. “Theirs is a desert planet. Water in large amounts confuses them, their tracking ability becomes limited. They cannot smell water and shun it. That is why we can spend a day beneath a flowing waterfall and they will in all likelihood lose our trail.”

Jacobi resigned himself to the journey. “But you’re not absolutely certain they will call off the quest?”

“I am sure they will not, now that they have discovered The Argon. It was our entry into the atmosphere which triggered their search.”

“Good. I was afraid I might have called them to us when I set up the rescue beacon.” Yarico said nothing because this was not a question. Had it been, Jacobi would have learned that was precisely how the Dranoc knew where to find them so quickly.

They neared the falls and the sound of rushing water increased as they approached a set of rapids below the overflowing torrent.

“What do you propose, Yarico? Do we keep running from them? We have no supplies and will have to live off the land. That won’t last long. What do we do?”

The Mintari was quick to reply: “Rather than run from them, I suggest we attack.”

Before Jacobi could voice his astonished response, Yarico began to climb the boulders that lined the riverbank. Jacobi thought it best to follow the Mintari’s lead. Yet, he had to ask: “So why did you pick me up and carry me like that?”

“Your final command last night. You said I was to save your ass. That seemed the most expedient method.”

Jacobi made a mental note that, in the future, he would try to be more specific when ordering Yarico around.

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The place Yarico found for them to hide was wet and cold. It was a shallow cave at the edge of a rock formation near where the river dropped ten meters straight down. Jacobi was uncomfortable and hungry but the Mintari was able to catch a fishlike creature literally by waiting patiently and grabbing it out of the water. Jacobi made futile attempts to do the same, but was no match for it. He never caught a thing.

They ate the first one raw. This gave Jacobi enough determination to gather kindling and light a fire. It was not too wet deeper inside their cave and the roaring falls drew the smoke out like a vacuum. Yarico obviously did not like the idea that the smoke might give away their position, but since he never volunteered anything, Jacobi simply did not ask his opinion. To Jacobi’s mind, the smoke was diluted by the spray from the water and, besides, he only needed to use the fire for cooking once a day and minimal warmth at night.

The fire was reduced to no more than a few glowing embers when Jacobi asked what plan the Mintari might have beyond hiding out. Yarico explained they could feel safe inside the cave for at most two or three nights. After that, they should put into action a counter offensive and back track the Dranoc to their headquarters on the planet.

“They would not have searched for us if we landed further than they could comfortably hike in one day,” Yarico explained. “That means their camp must not be far from The Argon. They undoubtedly left enough clues to point out which direction we should take to locate their base. Or we can find a tall mountain top to look around. Any mining operation is going to be large enough to spot from a height. If the Dranoc are operating in the jungle, they will have cleared an area within which to work. If there is a savanna or plains beyond and they are working there, the excavations will stand out.”

“And then what, Yarico?”

“We grab a space ship and run. Simple as that.”

. A chill ran up Jacobi’s spine. He was not sure if it was due to the cold catching up with him or the thought of trying surreptitiously to find and follow a Dranoc hunting party or blunder into their camp and steal a starship. Probably a combination of all three. He was depressed and the Mintari seemed to take notice. Yarico edged closer to the Earth man and put an arm around his shoulder.

Jacobi experienced an immediate level of consolation that was completely out of place with the environment and the company. It was as if his mind had just been put at ease and he became brightly, insipidly happy.

Yarico moved closer still and placed another arm around him. Then he hugged Jacobi in a most peculiar way. Instead of recoiling, Jacobi found himself feeling suddenly safe; he wanted to crawl into the Mintari’s lap and go to sleep.

A distinctly musky odor emanated from the Mintari which caught in Jacobi’s throat, traveled into his human brain. His cerebrum responded to the stimulus by sending a

signal to his loins where things began to stir. Sexual thoughts awoke in him for the first time since he visited the whore house on Pindar III. The cave was a comfort zone as he became enveloped in the orange arms of the softest, most gentle, loving and warm creature he had ever cuddled with; it was a combination of mom, his first girl friend, his sister and his grandmother which made him sit up suddenly and ask:

“You haven’t explained everything about yourself, have you Yarico?”

“No, I have not.”

“Why is that, exactly?”

“You never asked.”

“All right,” Jacobi gathered himself together and tried to take charge of the situation.

“So tell me. What are you?”

“I am a female Mintari known as Yarico. Family name, Chitok.”

Jacobi sat dumbfounded in the near darkness even as he wallowed in a warm, generous glow. “You’re kidding, Yarico, you’re supposed to be a male. The Cadan bought a male for his farm.”

The silent stare returned.

“Okay, I’ll ask questions. If you’re a female, how come nobody knew that?”

“All of my people knew, the auctioneer was a fool. My name is that of a female which is one method of distinguishing ourselves one to another. Male names for my species end in a labial stop, most commonly a ‘p.’ A female name commonly ends in an open vowel.”

“Why does it feel so good to be with you?”

“I have the ability to exude pheromones. Most often, my species use this as a defense mechanism. We do not fight. Instead, my people encourage cooperation by making others love us when we are in close proximity. Most of the time this is a one-way flight pattern. We do not fall in love with anyone other than our own kind. Usually.”

Jacobi began to pant with the heat of desire. His brain screamed for a sexual liaison as never before. He knew it was only in his mind, but the Mintari’s odd skin color seemed to have changed in the half light to become the same as his own. Suddenly, none of his, uh, correction, her other features, the large ears and robustly round eyes, the big nostrils and skinny, yet deceptively powerful, body mattered. The ears became the most lovely part of her. Jacobi brought his face around and began sucking one of her long luscious lobes. Her flat chest was the most voluptuous piece of anatomical flesh he had ever had the honor of laying hands on. As he massaged and pinched the material which covered her upper torso, he was surprised and pleased to see three nipples harden and rise under his fingertips.

He was more than smitten, he was head over heels in love and lust. He swooned and fell toward Yarico with lips wide, tongue ready to run down her throat, hands tugging at her apparel. The detached part of his mind realized she was doing the same to him, parting velcro snaps and pulling off his clothes.

He was able to come up for air and asked one more question before succumbing to his final sexual fulfillment which he knew was only a few seconds away. “What did you mean by ‘usually’?”

Yarico was demure in her reply. “I have come to love you, Captain Jacobi Myers, even if you are not of my race. And I make you a promise: I will see to it you leave this planet alive. Now, no more talking. Let us finish making love.”

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Yarico’s ability to follow broken twigs, bent branches, whatever minutiae might be left behind by a careless Dranoc was as surprising to Jacobi as her reserves of strength and the brilliant sex they had together. No sooner was he finished making love than he wanted to be inside her again. Eventually he slept that night, but he was sure she lay awake listening for intruders as he once had ordered her to do.

They wasted no time searching the jungle for evidence of the Dranoc and she soon located their trail. Reality returned when Jacobi confronted the fact they had one weapon which was a pea-shooter compared to what the Dranoc carried around. Yarico and Jacobi had crawled up a hillock, where they were hidden by tall grass. They overlooked a strip and pit mining operation that laid waste to the earth around it. The site was quite visible from many kilometers away and in a straight line from where The Argon lay in the not too distant jungle.

“If they follow their normal routine, four will set off at dusk in search of us. That reduces the number in camp. We will have the element of surprise. They will hardly be prepared for us to walk into their lair. We must get past a perimeter guard, preferably without giving away our presence, and make our way to the assembled craft over there.”

She nodded in the direction of a landing strip where several ships ferried supplies in and the results of the operation out.

“Any idea what they are digging for down there?”

“Rare earth metals, atomic weights from 57 to 71 most likely. Bring a good price if they are pure. I don’t see much refining going on so I’d guess they discovered a very rich field.”

As they waited out the sun, Jacobi kept thinking of how he had spent the last two nights. What amazed him most was the ardor of his love making: he was a lion that would not be satisfied. When he was close to her he found Yarico alluring and attractive beyond measure. Except right now. She was just plain old Yarico, his unintended co-pilot on an aborted cargo run. Together they were about to attempt an impossible frontal assault on a well-armed camp of trained soldiers. It was suicide, they didn’t stand a chance.

Then he caught a whiff of her lying in the grass beside him and he wanted to hop on and nail her that instant. He controlled himself by, instead, turning on his side and giving his back to her. Like an old married couple in bed, he thought grimly. What is it that she does to me?

But he knew the answer.

Jacobi dozed in the late afternoon sun. He awoke to the roaring sound of engines as a small ship took off into the darkening sky almost on a bee line toward The Argon. Yarico nudged him in the ribs and he turned to look directly into her eyes. Her high forehead became the only thing he could think of and he reached out to touch her brow. She brushed his hand away.

“Not now,” she said as she rose on her knees and studied the Dranoc. “We have a job to do. Let us begin by backing down this hill and slowly approach that guard on our left. I have a way of dealing with him.”

Jacobi crawled on his belly behind her, but could barely keep up with her swift progress. She waited patiently at the base of the hillock for him to catch up.

Yarico’s technique was simplicity itself. She planned to get close enough to the guard and turn on a specialized set of pheromones, she explained in a whisper. This would keep him occupied until they were well past. Trouble was, Jacobi was almost as near to her when she turned on what he later described as her “skunk” smell. It produced in him a violent, gut wrenching reaction similar to what the Dranoc guard must have felt. Jacobi was able to keep from retching, but the guard was not so fortunate. Whatever he had eaten as his last meal was suddenly all over his face and dripping down his tunic. A second regurgitating burst was prepared to expel itself from his body when he fell to his knees and bent double in a fit of dry heaves.

Yarico and Jacobi walked right past him without being seen or heard.

A half dozen ships rested on the tarmac. Jacobi had his choice of rolling stock and selected the smallest, what he thought would be a speedy model. It was probably the captain’s launch rather than a cargo transport, which meant it was also likely to be armed. He set about methodically knocking out the remaining ships’ telemetry. Taking away their eyes was as easy as pulling a fuse. Fortunately, he did not set off any alarms.

Yarico sat beside him in chairs that did not fit either of their forms well. He had difficulty keeping his hands off her as he played with the unusual set of instruments. At

last he thought he had the gist of how to operate the Dranoc vessel, sat back and strapped himself in. He told Yarico to do the same and she looked at him doe-eyed.

He had been right. The little ship was fast and furious. It took them out of the solar system where they had been stranded and propelled them straight into a familiar galaxy where he identified several friendly landing places. Their trip lasted two weeks and during that time Yarico almost never turned off her ability to arouse him. They fornicated their way back to civilization.

They checked into rooms at a local chain Jacobi thought was reliable. He left her to go in search of a certain person. They returned together. Jacobi turned to Yarico and said, “Goodbye, darlin’. You brought a pretty penny, but now you belong to this guy.” He fanned a wad of credits in her face and instructed her to leave with her new owner. She did as she was told.

After all, Jacobi worked alone. He couldn’t very well have someone hanging around who could turn him on and off like a light.

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