

A SPECK OF BLUE

Prey

The early morning chill began to wear on Grigri as he estimated he'd run nearly fifty kilometers in the last three hours. The vast open plains offered little in way of hiding, and the mountains, though looming in the distance, were still many kilometers off. Even if he reached them, the rocky cliffs and limited trees would provide little relief. To add to his woes, the sun began its slow rise over the mountains, revealing his position to those who hunted him. He was doomed and only delaying the inevitable.

The demenger's deep roar echoed off the distant mountains as it caught his scent once more, leading the hunters to his location faster than he could evade them. His current predicament was at the hands of Alymph Yordni, the most powerful person in this region of Astenor. It was Alymph's land Grigri ran across, a vast two thousand square kilometer wilderness used for personal sport. Unfortunately, Grigri had known the sport included murder, he'd simply never imagined he'd be the one hunted.

Grigri Baskinly was not from this country, coming here after being recruited by Alymph a few years prior after he'd successfully spied on his own country, providing Alymph with ample military intelligence to assist in the ongoing skirmishes along the border of the two countries. At the time, Grigri had thought he was backing the better of the two countries, attempting to rise in prominence with his betrayal. After all, that was what all Onyalum wanted, power.

Adanni had taken over Grigri when the young man was trying to make a name for himself in his own country. Unfortunately, Grigri was betrayed by his own men, dying during an espionage mission across the border. It wasn't that his men had disliked him, they simply wanted to save their own skins even if it cost Grigri his.

Astenor was not a planet of deep compassion for the fellow man. In fact, the general rule was look out for number one. You might look out

for those around you, as long as it didn't interfere with rule number one. The politics, economics, and culture were a complex web of lies and deceit, everyone vying for more power by stroking those above while walking on those below. It was perhaps the perfect world for an Onyalum, or so Adanni had thought till now.

Tyler watched intently as Adanni ran for his life. It wasn't as if Tyler was actively cheering the hunters, he'd simply tired of living in their collective subconscious and wanted his turn at life. He'd struck a deal with the Onyalum and had honored it through several lifetimes since leaving the Outer Galactic Commonwealth and its battle with the Acriend.

Though the life he'd chosen when his turn was short, the experience was far less exhilarating than those chosen by Adanni. The Onyalum had a propensity to step into deep waters, never fully understanding the situation or its consequences. They were truly Onyalum choices.

Still, the Onyalum had a knack for escaping death just before it appeared on his doorstep. This time however, it caught him off guard, and the beast tracking him would not relent until Grigri lay dead on the ground, his flesh the prize for the beast's efforts. Tyler tried not to cheer the massive animal following orders from its master, but this time Adanni deserved it.

That is a matter of opinion. Adanni interrupted, clearly preoccupied with the escape.

Whatever. Tyler replied. *I am ready to take over again and don't feel much remorse.*

As if there was a doubt. Adanni said in a clipped manner.

Ditto! Tyler spat, enjoying the moment far too much.

Adanni had easily integrated into the Locstor society, the country within which Alymph was a major player. Adanni's rise to prominence due his vast Onyalum knowledge and experience was meteoric, but others among him desired his position and they'd finally succeeded in blindsiding the arrogant Onyalum.

Like many in Locstor, Adanni enjoyed the fruits of his labors, the finest food and drink, and an abundance of cash to fritter away while pursuing his desires. But something was lacking and he'd lowered his guard in search of that elusive thing Tyler called love and Adanni called ridiculous. But there it was, the Onyalum had fallen for a girl, and now it would cost him his life.

The young woman was Sirinia Shoni, and though she kept her mother's maiden name per custom on this world, she was the daughter

of Alymph Yordni. Looking back, it seemed such an obvious trap for Adanni, but at the time, Tyler had been submerged in the oceans of civilizations trapped within their collective consciousness, unable to properly advise his alien counterpart. It wouldn't have made a difference, his own track record was dubious at best.

But the tale got better. Not only had she'd snared Adanni in her web of lies underlying a soft and sensuous physique, she'd convinced him to betray her own father in an attempt to win back the good graces of his home country where they would settle to raise a family. Even now, the sordid affair was too funny for Tyler to discuss with the alien. An Onyalum, trapped by love!

The foolish Onyalum had taken the bait, swallowing the hook as it were. Sirinia was soon pregnant, and logically, Adanni thought the child his. But she was in love with another of her father's underlings, a man who coveted Adanni's position and would go to great lengths to remove the foreigner from power. And his girlfriend had played right along with him, both setting an elaborate trap for the unsuspecting Adanni.

In the end, they had admitted everything to Adanni, laughing at him through the bars of his confinement. With no paternity tests available on this world of limited technology, Adanni's pleas to Alymph fell on deaf ears. Not only had Adanni defiled the man's daughter, he'd been caught trading secrets back to his own country in return for a pardon for his war crimes. The pregnancy was only the icing on the cake.

Even though hunting Grigri was illegal in Locstor, all its citizens would have applauded the death of a Wensten who'd defiled a Locstorian woman of breeding. It was one thing to hire Wensten thugs to help in the war against their country, but another to allow them similar rights Locstorian's enjoyed. In the eyes of the Locstorian people, Wenstens were animals, barely tolerated like the pets they rarely kept.

The demenger roared again, and the sound was closer than before. Tyler grew excited with the prospect of taking over even if he felt a tinge of pity for his alien friend.

Spare me your pity, Earthling, I do not care if this is the end. Adanni said with malice. *Besides, I am not dead, yet.*

Yes, the demenger will undoubtedly lose your trail in this open expanse of grass. Tyler snickered.

Adanni ignored the quip as he eyed the distant sunrise over the mountains. Daylight would be a death sentence as the hunter's scopes

would easily spot him across the plains. He had to find shelter or weapons, or he would not survive to see another night.

Alymph had given him a two hour head start, but that was only to provide the illusion of sport. The great man himself carried a rifle no doubt hoping to be the one who took Grigri down. Perhaps he'd given orders to only wing him, saving the final shot for himself. Adanni held no illusions what would happen after that. The demenger would feast.

Most feared the enormous reptiles, a horrible cross between a Komodo dragon and a rhinoceros. Their sense of smell was uncanny, and though they were generally more sluggish in this temperate part of the planet, their size afforded them greater speed than those being chased. They were hard to train, but worth it if you enjoyed the hunt. Nothing on Astenor could track as well, and few animals were as feared.

Adanni fell to the ground as he tripped over a dead tree. He lay in the grass resting, feeling ground vibrations through his heavy breathing as the demenger drew in, its bulk pounding the soft dirt of the open plain. The vibrations moved him to action and he rose to his feet, his legs burning as he tasked them to continue.

The mountains loomed closer, and Adanni figured they would be his only hope to elude the hunters. He was an able climber, and if nothing else, could climb high enough to hide inside a crevice or small cave, though if he succeeded, they would simply wait him out, letting starvation or dehydration do what their weapons could not. For a brief moment, he thought about giving up.

Wow, I never thought I would hear an Onyalum say that. Tyler scolded. *Then again, I guess when they are cornered they take the easy path to seek greener pastures. However, in your case, the greener pastures will be mine to enjoy.*

The goading spurred Adanni forward, and he picked up the pace as another roar signaled the beast was closing in. As he pumped his arms and legs harder, he noticed the ground changed, the grass giving way to rock and bare dirt as the mountains rose from the plains into the purple skies of morning. He pushed onward, spots swimming in his eyes as his body begged for oxygen.

Tyler felt guilty and fed power into the body, sustaining it for the final thrust into the hills. Though he wanted to take over, he didn't want the alien working against him in his next life. Better to maintain a healthy relationship now and save the goading for another time.

Thanks. Adanni said as the refreshed body and spirit renewed his purpose.

Hey, I couldn't let you go down without a fight. Well, at least an Onyalum fight. Tyler replied.

Adanni scrambled the last few meters and grabbed hold of the rock that rose quickly to dizzying heights. His deft movements and renewed energy carried him high up the cliff face, his eyes and mind staying focused on the next hand or foothold. He scanned the area but found no place to hide. If the hunters caught up now, it would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

The cry of the demenger as it pulled to a stop at the base of the cliff was forlorn and angry, its quarry out of reach. But it would not relent, and Adanni heard the telltale sounds of the beast attempting to scale the cliff. Thankfully, its feet were designed for the ground rather than scaling rock walls. It continued bellowing in frustration, the sound carrying across the plains to the hunters close behind.

Better move it, Alien. Tyler offered.

You think? Adanni replied sarcastically.

Just trying to help. Tyler said trying to keep the laughter from his voice.

Adanni stopped for a moment, his perch more secure. He eyed the beast below, its forked tongue whipping about its head as it smelled the promised flesh out of reach. It bellowed again, the forlorn cry echoing off the cliff wall, raising goose bumps on Grigri's skin. In the increasing daylight, Adanni looked back to where the hunt had started, but the clouds of dust of the approaching trucks converging on his position forced him into action.

He cleared another ledge and found a small crevice he could wedge himself into that might provide a modicum of shelter against gunfire. Then what? Wait until night and continue up the cliff? Adanni knew what these mountains were like: barren, little life, little water. Even if he eluded his captors, the wilderness would claim him.

Too bad camping isn't your thing! Tyler chided.

Just because I don't like it, doesn't mean I can't do it. Adanni shot back angrily.

Tyler wouldn't relent. *Fine, let's see some mountaineering, Alien.*

Adanni abandoned the small crevice and continued upward, angling slightly to the right where the slick rock turned coarser and easier to grasp. He was making good time, but had a long way to go before reaching the top. He needed to find cover.

The sound of a bullet ricocheting off the rock nearby motivated him towards a small ledge only ten meters above him. He couldn't tell how much cover it would provide, but he was out in the open and didn't stand a chance. Another bullet hit close, the spray of rock temporarily blinding him. They were toying with him and it confirmed what he had already imagined, they were saving him for the boss.

He ignored the barrage of bullets and climbed to the ledge. At least there, he could rest if only for a brief while. His hands and arms were tiring, and more than once he'd slipped, only to catch himself before falling. A small part of him wanted to fall, denying Alymph his prize.

Suddenly, the bullets stopped as he cleared the last meter and pulled himself onto the ledge, temporarily concealing himself. He lay on his back chest pumping wildly from the exertions. Tyler fed more energy into Grigri, attempting to calm his heart and restore the strength to his muscles. Adanni closed his eyes and lay still, the beast finally silent below. Alymph had arrived.

"Well done, Grigri, well done." The booming voice of Alymph rose to meet Adanni's ears, the sound abrasive and demanding. "Few make it this far, so I am impressed. But where to now?"

Adanni remained silent.

A new, petulant voice called up to him. "I love you, Grigri, don't listen to him, I know you will escape, my love!"

Oh, she is good. Tyler said as Sirinia played out the charade for her father.

Probably why I loved her. Adanni said. *A woman with an Onyalum heart.*

Yeah, but she is going to rip that heart out of you. Tyler replied.

Adanni caught his breath and inhaled before responding. "If I do escape, my love, I promise I'll be back to kill you and your boyfriend."

Her voice replied with genuine tears. "I understand why you say these things, my love, but you no longer have to pretend. We love each other and my father will have to accept that. He will have to accept our child!"

Damn she is so good! Tyler said nearly laughing. *I bet her father is livid.*

As if confirming Tyler's words, Alymph's voice bellowed, the anger palpable. "Stand up you damned traitor and face me like a man!"

"I am not the traitor Alymph, your daughter is." Adanni replied. "Just ask Thren, he is the one who got her pregnant. You know he has

been after my job since you promoted me. The two of them hatched this whole thing up!”

The sound of Thren’s laughter was too much. “And I suppose those secrets you were trading to Wensten for your forgiveness were from me?”

It was hopeless, Alymph would never believe Adanni even if he had a DNA test proving Thren was the father. Blood and nationality was ultimately thicker than water.

A shot echoed off the cliff wall as the bullet hit just above Adanni. He remained on his back practically blending into the rock as he squeezed further into the wall.

Alymph’s voice yelled again. “I’ll make you get up, you coward! I have more pets for you to meet, you bastard, and these will make you move!”

Shit, now what? Adanni asked in despair.

Who knows? Tyler said. *But if they fly, you are screwed.*

A dark shadow temporarily blocked out the rising sun, the shape unmistakably that of a flying creature.

You’re screwed. Tyler confirmed.

Two more shapes joined the first, the three circling high above Adanni’s position. Adanni and Tyler watched them carefully, trying to identify the black shapes.

Got me. Adanni said. *But they look menacing.*

At least they aren’t as large as the demenger. Tyler offered weakly.

“They are called raculans, a predatory creature trained to hunt by the Jujin in the mountains of Jantonk.” Alymph said gleefully. “I had these specially trained to hunt cowards like you. This is the first time I have used them, so I hope they work out!”

As if on command, one of the creatures left the circling pattern and dove straight at Adanni, its dark eyes focused on the quarry trapped on the cliff face. As it neared, its leathery wings grew translucent as the sun backlit them through the membranes. It was a bat on steroids with a long beak lined with sharp teeth and claws outstretched towards Adanni’s face. It was not a huge creature but possessed formidable weaponry.

At the last minute, Adanni sat up, the creature missing by a fraction of a centimeter as Adanni brought his arm around to hit the creature in the back. It screeched horribly before flying off the ledge, its cries bringing the other two diving in. One he could handle, but two would be impossible on his small ledge. He made a decision and began

climbing once more, hoping the creatures couldn't hover. But the thought of one landing on his back, its claws sinking deep into his flesh made him move faster.

Gunfire erupted as he appeared out of hiding, the spray of rock surrounding him, forcing the raculans to veer from their dive.

Alymph's voice screamed across the plains. "Stop shooting, you idiots, I want to see what the raculans will do! If any of you injure my pets, I'll personally feed you to my demenger!"

The gunfire stopped, but the screech of the raculans was far worse. All three were coming around for the attack, and Adanni knew he wouldn't make it. He gathered his strength, a last minute idea popping into his head. With a final glance below, he launched his body from the cliff face, the feeling liberating after being hunted.

The raculans were surprised, only one not veering off as gravity ensured his escape. The claws of one of its feet raked his face, the pain searing as his body was swiveled upward. He watched the retreating raculans while he fell, their screeching the only sound above the rush of wind blowing across his ears. He hoped his aim and strength would still win the day as he flailed his arms and legs uselessly.

When he hit, there was no sound, only the familiar pop as his spirit left the crushed body. There was little left to save anyway, every bone broken, many pushing through the skin in a tangled mess of blood and bone. But his aim had been true.

Tyler and Adanni watched in morbid amusement as Sirinia cried hysterically at her boyfriend's mangled form beneath the remnants of Grigri and the truck. At least some form of vengeance was served. Alymph was yelling at his daughter, his voice silent in the Onyalum world. Only now did the powerful man fully understand the deception of his own flesh and blood.

Bravo, my alien friend, bravo! Tyler said quietly as the chaotic scene unfolded below them. *I never would have thought of that!*

Are you sure? Adanni said knowingly. *It may have been the easy way out, but it definitely was the Onyalum way out.* He concluded ominously.

Indeed, brother. Tyler agreed. *But you know what this means?*

Adanni was silent for a moment before responding. *Yes, I know what this means, but perhaps you would like to amend our agreement?* He pleaded halfheartedly.

Not likely. Tyler said, suddenly on guard.

Don't worry, Earthling. Adanni said. *I'll honor our agreement. I only offer you a deal. You take this turn, as is your due, but I get the next two after that.*

Whoa, Tyler said, *what a deal, let me see, how about no?*

I haven't made my offer yet. Adanni said.

Tyler didn't want to hear it. Nothing could be worth spending two lifetimes imprisoned within their subconscious. *You've got nothing I want, Alien.*

Really? Adanni said cynically. *Then you don't want to spend your next life back on Earth?*

Tyler began to laugh until he realized what the alien was offering. He'd always suspected Adanni hid the location of his home world from him, but now that it had been offered, he didn't believe it was possible.

What? He mumbled as his mind reeled with the implications.

You heard me, Earthling, do you want to go home and is it worth trading a lifetime for?

Adanni sounded serious and Tyler grew fearful. What would it be like? Would he see Linda? He doubted that. What if the planet had been destroyed? He'd give up a life for nothing more than seeing the remains of his home world.

Don't worry, Earthling, if it is not there, you can pick another world, but I still get two lifetimes for taking you back.

Tyler was both excited and afraid of the possibilities. How many Earth years had he been gone? How had humanity evolved?

You'll never know unless you go. Adanni urged.

Would it be worth a lifetime? After so long, did he really want to see his old home again? The answer was obvious, and Adanni had already known it.

Deal. Tyler said as he felt the familiar rush of a transition into the Universe.