

A Noble Sacrifice

excerpt by Ciara Gold

One

On the Planet of Pelicosia, 3024

Betrayed!

Tared Charst grabbed at the restraint collar around his neck.

Ahead, the mists of Hell loomed, tempting and foreboding. This forgotten planet hid many dangers behind a veil of lush greenery and the promise of rich zeal.

He stalled, not wanting to move forward. Acute, numbing pain shot through his veins. His teeth clamped together, and he arched his back. The pain from the collar brought him to his knees. Crystallized rocks tore into his flesh. Whooshing wind and flapping wings caused Tared to look up. A dragon bore down on him, framed against a nezarine sky.

No hope.

Sharp talons punctured his skin. He cried out, his voice lost amid the dragon's angry bellow. As he was yanked from the ground, Tared's muscles stretched taut, and his toes scraped the ground. He bit his lip, tasting tangy blood. Then he saw it. The thing he feared most--the zeal pits, the crystallized rock rising from the dark hole like bony fingers.

The dragon's claws retracted.

Tared thrashed, his body fighting the gravitational pull toward a deep abyss. Warm mists reached out to embrace him, drawing him closer, pulling at his hair and limbs. He closed his eyes, dreading the pain.

Betrayed.

Once more, his own brother had betrayed him.

Confusion gave way to sorrow. His brother's men, the Verside, had doomed him to relive the torment and torture of the zeal pits. The band around his hair loosened. Long tendrils whipped around his face. He tried to relax. Fighting would prove useless. He allowed the gravitational pull to carry him farther into the belly of Pelicosia, into a Hell no man should suffer.

His eyes jarred open when he landed upon a pillow of air. He

swallowed, his throat parched. Beneath his feet, the floor bounced, denying him the dignity of standing erect. Crawling, he inched forward. An acidic odor burned his nostrils and made his stomach cramp. Fear clutched him tight to her breast.

Ahead, a bright light shone. It seduced, beckoned. Tared crawled toward it, seeking release yet knowing none would be found. He should have killed his brother when he'd had the chance. With Dane dead, the horror of this moment wouldn't be real.

Tears ran down his cheeks. Tears? By the god Draccus, the zeal pits reduced a man to a whining child. With great effort, he lifted his hand to wipe the dampness from his skin. Already, the effects of this Hell zapped his strength.

The light. Light promised the way home. And when he returned to the surface, he'd claim his due from Dane. Hatred festered, creating a dark place in his soul. Madness--pure madness to hate one's own flesh and blood to the point of murder.

Ah, Draccus, if you have any love in your heart, save me from this emotional turmoil.

As if Draccus had heard his plea, a dark spot opened. Another way out?

The craving for light grew stronger. Tared forced his gaze from the light and fought against its magnetic pull with all the strength he possessed. Knowing what horrors lay behind the glow, he strained toward the darkness. The darkness might prove more grievous, yet he had to take the chance that something different awaited him. He crawled forward. The closer he came, the farther the darkness appeared. A cry escaped his lips. The black abyss shrank. He must hurry or lose the opportunity forever.

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Joyella Denué stared at the windowed chamber, her attention focused on Normden. Her gaze followed the strong curve of his spine. His muscles flexed. She admired his graceful form, the wide shoulders and trim waist. What woman wouldn't admire this handsome man? He had his back to her, unaware of her fervent regard. By Yutenk's soul, Joyella could no longer summon the desire to own such a man. She frowned. Soon her mother would be forced to acknowledge Joyella's bid for a lifemate. How could she withdraw such a request? Her mother would never understand, and shame kept Joyella from explaining.

"Joyella!" Shole rounded the corner, cheeks flushed and expression alight with joy. "You'll never guess."

Joyella smiled at her friend. Shole forever exaggerated one tale or another. "I won't have to guess, Shole. You'll tell me anyway."

Without stopping for breath, Shole grabbed Joyella's hands and spun her around. "I'm to receive the Blessing of Yutenk. I'm to choose

my lifemate.”

Although happy for her friend, Joyella’s heart shattered at her own status. Shole’s good fortune put Joyella one step closer to the same fate.

“I’m pleased, Shole. You’re most deserving.” Joyella’s voice betrayed her misgivings.

Shole clasped a hand to her mouth. “Forgive me, Joyella. I... I didn’t think. I should never have...”

Had Shole assumed Joyella’s disheartened attitude reflected her impatience to select a lifemate? Nothing could be further from the truth.

“No, Shole. You have every right to share your joy. I’m sure my mother has her reasons for overlooking my application.”

“You don’t hate me?”

Joyella pursed her lips. “Of course not. How could you even think of such? So tell me. Whom will you choose?”

A spark of devilment danced in Shole’s eyes, and she stared at Normden. By now he’d turned, and he sauntered near the window to place a hand against the glass. “I hear you have good news to share, Shole,” he said.

She giggled. “I’ve been granted the Blessing of Yutenk . Tomorrow I choose my lifemate.”

“And... will you choose me?”

A knifing pain should have torn at Joyella’s heart. She and Normden had spoken often of the possibility of their fated companionship. Yet only sadness prevailed, followed by a deep sense of loss.

“I favor Cheltar,” Shole replied, “yet I would be well pleased with Vorne. I hate that we aren’t able to see your faces during the ceremony, but I think I could recognize the body shape of either of them.”

“You tease me, Shole. Am I not pleasing to the eye? Do I not tempt you in any way?” Although Normden spoke to Shole, he settled his intense gaze upon Joyella.

Shole laughed. “You’re right. I do tease. You know good and well Yutenk will do as she pleases. None of us have a real say in whom we select for mate.”

The women gathered prospective candidates for lifemates and positioned them about the Sacred Sphere of Azna. With their heads to the floor and their bodies tucked close, they would bow to Yutenk. One female circled the males until harmonious light from the sphere illuminated the man most likely to offer the best companionship. While

technically a woman had to abide by Yutenk's decision, the goddess often kept the woman's wishes in mind when selecting a lifemate. "My words need not hurt you, Normden. Joyella would choose you if given the chance."

Normden pressed a hand against the transparent wall. "A myon ago, I would have believed this true, but Joyella has changed. She no longer wants our union. I think her naiveté has her fearing the worst."

An uninvited memory made Joyella's stomach knot. He thought her naïve in the ways of men and women. Oh, how she wished that were the case. A shadow fell between them, and Joyella whirled to greet her other friend.

"Asa, have you come to wish Shole congratulations?"

Asa gave them both an impish grin. "And for what should she be congratulated?"

Shole danced around the woman, her curly hair bouncing about her jubilant features. "Kormion accepted my application. On the morrow, I shall receive the Blessing of Yutenk."

Asa smiled. "This is good news. You deserve nothing but the best in a mate." She turned to Joyella and her smile faded. "Kormion bade me summon you to the Great Common."

Joyella stiffened. "Why?"

"Kormion felt another ripple in the Common. She wishes you to read the stones to discover the source of our trouble."

Joyella already knew the source. "Did she say anything else? Did she mention my rite of passage?"

"No, sweeting. Kormion cannot be rushed. She fails to see how you've grown."

Kormion couldn't see how she'd grown, but a stranger had. A stranger had stolen her youth. A stranger had taken her most precious gift, perpetuating the change to come upon her before the blessing of Yutenk. Like Shole, Asa thought her disappointed. Joyella smiled, greatly relieved.

"I don't understand why she stalls," Asa said. "Waiting must be torture. Others your age have had the blessing bestowed upon them. Even Shole receives the honor, and she is five yons younger than you. I fail to understand your mother's reasons."

Joyella nodded, pretending agreement. "She must think I'm not ready."

"You're her daughter." Asa put a comforting arm about her shoulders. "She doesn't wish to lose you. Already, the men pay tribute to your beauty. She wants her only child to select the finest for mate."

A shudder ran through Joyella. Another had damaged her fragile core. Custom would force her to take a mate, yet if it were up to her, she would live without the Blessing of Yutenk. Asa's arms fell away. "Come. You tarry for no reason."

She tarried with good reason, but Shole and Asa didn't need to know.

"Go with Asa, Joyella," Shole said. "I plan to walk the cubicles and admire my choices before adhering to the sphere's edict."

"But Yutenk absorbs what is in your heart," Joyella replied.

"You are blessed, Shole, to have this moment draw near. I would give anything to trade places with you, but alas, I must await my mother's whim." The lie rolled easily off her tongue. In that moment, she hated the woman she'd become.

Shole reached out, and the two friends exchanged the touch of passing. Joyella's fingers brushed Shole's with light pressure before turning on her heel. She hurried to keep pace with Asa. There was no use in angering Kormion further. Her mother ruled Yalfar with a firm hand.

Joyella placed a restraining hand upon Asa's shoulder. "We must stop here so I may retrieve the stones from my room." She gathered the box of stones and motioned Asa to continue to the Common Temple. They entered a cavernous opening lined with protruding crystals. In the center, a large sphere shone brightly. Within the translucent globe, a hologram projected the essence of the first queen of Yalfar. Yet Yutenk was so much more. She represented the spiritual heart and soul of each of the Temi people combined. With her functioning brain programmed into the main computer and her energy fueled by recycled zeal, she passed judgment and gave wise council.

Incense burned around the sacred globe. The sweet aroma of jerene moss caused Joyella's stomach to curl. She tamped down the nausea that had plagued her of late, fearing Kormion would think her weak. She moved forward. They had built the sacred altar nine generations ago when the Temi tribe first came to live beneath the planet's surface.

She went down on bended knees, placed the box before her, and raised her arms wide. With eyes closed, she hummed. Internal peace claimed her. Soft vibrations radiated from the sphere. The Common welcomed her, cradling her spirit with harmonious warmth. The vibrations ceased, and Joyella's eyelids lifted.

Kormion approached with an impatient stride. "Rise, my daughter."

Joyella stood, her hands crossed over her chest in reverent greeting. "You summoned me?"

Kormion's cameolle garment swayed between her legs. "I have

need of your gift. The Common blazed a vivid red this morn. I would know why."

Joyella dropped her hands to her side. "Red? A stranger enters the votrem. The sphere records pain. The meaning of its color holds no secret."

"But this time," Kormion said, "a low-pitched wail sounded from its core, a plaintive cry unlike any I've heard. Something disturbs the peace of the Common, something other than a mere stranger trapped in the votrem."

Joyella shivered. She hated the idea behind the votrem. The force field protected them from discovery, but at what price? The poor souls who lived through the votrem's cruel effects suffered permanent damage to their neuro-stems. Electrowaves short-circuited areas of the brain, causing its victims to live the rest of their lives with schizophrenic tendencies or neurotic impulses.

"And you think the stones will tell you what troubles the Common?" Joyella asked.

"Kormion, come quick!" Pem and Gesstine rushed into the room, their sides heaving with exertion.

"You dare disturb a private audience?"

"It's important. The intruder - he has breached our outer defenses."

"What?" Kormion's face lost color. "It can't be."

No, it couldn't be. Joyella cringed. She'd patched the rip. She'd been so careful to repair the gaping hole in the votrem's lining. Was there another way around Yalfar's force fields? Surely her actions had not caused another to invade their private sanctuary.

"Kormion?"

"Send Daphid and Mort to apprehend the intruder," Kormion commanded. "We cannot have him running loose within our fortress. Have him brought here at once. I would know what danger he poses."

Joyella pressed her fingers to her lips, willing the queasiness to subside. "Kormion, do you still wish a reading?"

"No. I believe we've already discovered the cause. Perhaps you should leave. This business is sure to become... distressful."

"I'd rather stay. As your only daughter, I'll someday rule in your stead, and I'll need to know how best to handle these types of situations."

Kormion gazed down her thin nose, her manner full of condemnation. "You're not yet old enough to concern yourself with such matters. And I have no plans of dying anytime soon. Leave."

Joyella gasped, dazed by her mother's thoughtless words.
"You're wrong. You're always wrong where I'm concerned."

"I'll not argue the point, Joyella."

"Then at least let me read the stones." She needed to know if she were at fault. "They might tell you something different, or they might tell you something more."

Kormion's eyes turned stormy. "Read the stones. We need to be amused while we wait."

She turned away, dismissing Joyella to attend other matters. Amused? Amused? Blood pounded in Joyella's veins. Her mother sought to belittle her. She was the one who had requested Joyella's reading.

Asa hurried forward. "Let me help you arrange them, Joyella."

"No, Asa. Thank you for offering, but I think the task will help sooth my nerves." Her fingers trembled as she reached for the sacred box.

Asa dipped her head and murmured, "She is ruled by jealousy."

Joyella's fingers stilled. "Jealousy? Of what is there to be jealous?"

"Have you looked in a mirror lately? You are young and beautiful. She envies your silky auburn hair and flawless skin. Your mother's beauty fades. The young males no longer look upon her with lustful eyes. She craves their absolute devotion, but now she must compete with others more beautiful than she."

Joyella smiled. "Thank you. You always find a way to diffuse my temper."

"You think I jest?"

Asa had it all wrong. Joyella knew her mother better than anyone, and nothing could be farther from the truth. No, Kormion wasn't jealous. She was merely cautious, and she enjoyed being in control.

Joyella gave Asa a gentle nod. "Leave me. You make it difficult to concentrate, but I thank you for the compliment. And you're wrong. Kormion still radiates a youthful appearance. Nary a wrinkle mars her skin, and her dark hair betrays little gray. She still turns heads."

"Yes, but her hair lacks the striations of gold that mark you as unique. And, unlike your green eyes, hers have a cloudy haze. She shows her age. It won't be long before she must abdicate her throne to your council. Best start seeing the truth of the situation and prepare yourself. Yalfar requires a strong leader, not a woman who thinks so little of herself."

Joyella frowned. Kormion's constant criticism made it difficult to see herself in a favorable light, but Asa's words held wisdom. Asa stepped back to give her room to work. Joyella placed the meersier box upon the sacred altar. Her finger glided over the container with reverence. Looking at the plain box, a stranger to their customs would not realize the treasure hidden within. Joyella closed her eyes and intoned the ritual words.

"Fair of right, word of might, collect thy thoughts that I might seek wisdom and knowledge." She inhaled deeply and opened the lid. Within the velvety sesnal-lined box rested a treasure more valuable than zeal. "Behold the Five Stones of Asnar."

With forefinger and thumb, she lifted the first stone, a translucent gem that radiated a soft amber glow. "Unoke holds the secrets of memory."

She set Unoke beside the box, where a carved notch allowed it to rest. Next she pulled out a brilliant red stone of similar size and shape and placed it beside Unoke.

"Duexite holds the secrets of the future."

In similar fashion, she retrieved a polished yellow stone with iridescent flecks of orange, a rough stone with sharp, angular planes of black glass and a blue stone peppered with orange striations.

"Yorellite holds the secrets of the Common. Fauxite holds the mysteries surrounding the past, and Nazerite tempers the other four stones with balance."

She picked up Duexite and clutched it to her breast. Turning, she walked to the sphere and held the stone aloft. Upon her palm, the stone quivered, releasing a variety of colors. The jerene moss overwhelmed the room with a sweet aroma. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Kormion approach. Silence claimed Joyella's audience as curious eyes awaited her findings.

As though in a trance, she peered into the heart of the stone, then whimpered. Guilt made the images blur. She blinked away her uncertainties and tried again. Heat radiated from the gem. Visions of turbulent water collided with scenes of stark, barren wasteland. Frantic, chaotic views of exploding lights and battle-angry men vied for attention.

The stone burned, a passionate bid to release all of its secrets. Joyella juggled the warm rock between her trembling hands. The heat intensified. With a yelp, she dropped the stone. It rolled to a stop at Kormion's feet. Dazed, Joyella fell to her knees. Asa rushed to her side.

"You will tell us what you saw," Kormion commanded.

"Give her time, my Queen." Asa patted Joyella's back.

"Joyella, answer me."

From a distance, she heard her mother's voice, and she felt Asa's soothing touch. She swallowed, her throat dry and tense. "I saw chaos. I saw the Temi tribe clawing its way through water. I saw a man, a large man with bronzed skin and dark eyes. He--"

"Enough theatrics, Joyella," Kormion said. "Tell us."

But she dared not. She stared at the symmetrical pattern created by inlaid ditrite stones. The safety of Yalfar rested upon her shoulders, yet she imparted information at great risk to herself. "He will assume command of the Temi Tribe," Joyella said. Pain ripped through her scalp. Her eyes flew wide, and she clutched at the fingers entwined in her hair.

Kormion yanked her daughter's head back. "You lie. No man will ever rule Yalfar."

Tears blurred Joyella's vision. "I only know what the stone showed me, Mother."

Kormion released her with an exaggerated flourish and began to pace. Moments later, Daphid and Mort returned to report their failure in finding the stranger.

"I cannot believe with our advanced technology that we haven't the means of locating one stranger!" Kormion declared.

"We have never needed this ability, my Queen," Daphid replied.

"Yet we have the ability to detect this stranger's entrance into our refuge. How can this be?"

Daphid frowned. "An alarm sounded the moment he ventured through the inner layer of the votrem. Our ancestors did not think past setting up an alarm system."

"Then set the engineering team to devising a means to track our intruder. This situation will not ruin my day." Kormion allowed her gaze to sweep over those present. "Tomorrow we proceed as usual. We will conduct the Blessing of Yutenk as planned and celebrate Shole's good fortune. By then, they'll have apprehended the intruder, or you will all answer to me. Do I make myself clear?"

Daphid and Mort both nodded while Asa stared wide-eyed at her queen. Joyella stood on shaky legs. She'd never seen Kormion so angered.

"You are all dismissed."

Joyella and Asa crossed their arms over their breasts and bowed slightly. Joyella retrieved the stones and replaced them in the box before leaving the Common. When they had cleared the room, she turned to Asa, the meernsier box clutched to her chest.

"You didn't tell your mother everything, did you?" Asa asked with unerring insight.

Joyella stared off into space. She dare not confide all she'd seen nor all she knew. She still couldn't believe the consequences of her foolhardy deed. If only she weren't so restless, so inquisitive.

"You don't have to tell me," Asa went on, "but I want to hear more about the man you saw. Yalfar has never had a visitor. Not since we came to be here, over two hundred yons ago. What did he look like?"

"Tall," Joyella replied. "Taller than our men, and solemn. He looked as if he trained often, for his muscles strained against the costume he wore. His eyes were like dark, shadowed caves drawing me in."

Asa exaggerated a shiver of disgust. "You describe a man that would be hard on the eyes. I am glad I've already chosen my dronemate. If this man is caught, Kormion will make a slave of him. Some unfortunate soul will have to own such a specimen, but not I."

Joyella agreed, but not for the same reasons Asa gave. The stranger's eyes reminded her of another's. Could this man be from the same tribe as the man who'd attacked her? Save for the angular shape of his nose, she would have thought him one and the same. Deep foreboding gripped her. The man in her vision had commanded more than her people. She shivered. His dark eyes had claimed hers as if she were there. She had been powerless to evade his interest. His passion had dominated her, imprisoned her with overwhelming desire.

"How do you think the stranger breached our defenses?" Asa asked.

Joyella squeezed her eyes shut. "I know not."

The lie lay heavy upon her chest. She knew all too well how it was possible. She knew because she was responsible for the unforgivable act. May the Common forgive her, for it would be a long time before she forgave herself.