

HARDSHELLZ

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WARNING! This book contains scenes of horror and moderate violence.

It is not intended for the easily offended or young children. You have been warned, so if you read on, don't blame me.

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As with the earlier Krillaz, this story is dedicated to my fellow writer, Dai Alanye, whose Roger Fee series initially inspired this series, and whose friendship has kept me going and writing.

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This time, Vic Vargo is hired to bid at auction for a valuable sea shell on behalf of an oligarch with more money than sense and then guard it on its way to a private museum. Easy money, Vargo thinks. What could go wrong? But that's just the start of Vargo's troubles as everything does go wrong. And is the oligarch himself a man to be trusted? Using his wits, strength and reflexes Vargo does his best to save his friends, succeed in his mission and keep his reputation as the best interplanetary recovery agent in the galaxy.

Although this is a follow-up to Krillaz, it is a stand-alone story.

CHAPTER 1: I LAND ON BATAVIA VII.

You know what makes something valuable? Scarcity – or the danger of getting it. But as there's always enough fools willing to lay their lives on the line, rarity matters far more than danger. Take an example – alright, why not take a drink as well as an example? Might as well while we wait for the Star-Liner to fly me away to Nova Veaga where the fun'll really start. Where was I?

Okay, an example. Take this drink. It's a rare whisky called Laphroaig. A peated single malt whisky from the Scottish island of Islay. That's back on old Earth itself. They say it's the most richly flavoured whisky in the galaxy. Even now, it's only made in time honoured traditional ways on that one island in the whole universe. Hand crafted by artisans or something. Even on Earth it costs a lot but on this planet hundreds of light years away, the expense is astronomical. Go on, bartender, twist my arm, I'll have another. It's not every day I get to celebrate earning a big bonus.

Where was I? I've probably had too much but I've earned it. Oh yes, rarity. Well, real Laphroaig is expensive because it's still rare. It's not mass-produced and here we are billions and billions of kilometres away still savouring it.

Now some things were once expensive but are now much cheaper. Motor cars after Henry Ford sorted out mass production hundreds and hundreds of years ago. Remember him? Or diamond. That was once the most expensive mineral on Earth but after people sent robots to mine 55 Cancri e – you've heard of it, a super-massive

world orbiting a pulsar or something only 41 light years from Earth itself – then the cost dropped like a stone.

Even I've got a knife with a blade made of solid diamond. It's saved my life more than once, I can tell you. Holds its edge well. Sorry, I can't show you as all weapons had to be checked in on arrival. But take my word for it, it's beautiful. Now, before 55 Cancri e was opened up, wars would have been fought over such a weapon. Now it's in the hands of an interplanetary recovery agent. That's me – Vic Vargo. Recoveries, rescues, rampages and all odd jobs nobody else would touch is my speciality.

Go on. Pour me another, bartender. I'm a survivor, a winner, simple as that and while I wait I'm getting wasted. That's still allowed, isn't it? The Nu-Puritans aren't here, are they? Big money and I'm alive to spend it. For now. What do they say? Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die? Well, I don't intend karking it any time soon. Not while I've got a tonne of money to burn through. Yes, pour me another – and make it large, why don't you. And why don't you say something?

Yes, I was drunk. But after what I'd survived, I'd earned the right to enjoy a blow-out in the departures lounge of Batavia VII's starport before heading out for a well-earned break on the hedonistic world of Nova Veaga. A bit of R and R never hurt anybody.

I looked up from the highly polished bar and into the highly polished face of the bartender. It was a servo-bot specially designed to wait on bars. It hovered there on its anti-gravity unit while two of its spider arms polished glasses until they sparkled, two more served other customers and another set my Laphroaig onto a

coaster. Behind it, further appendages rearranged bottles with exactitude. It could hold several conversations at once but seemed to have adopted a watchful silence with me. Probably it was wondering if it should call a security-bot.

Then, in its reflective surface, I saw the face of the man I had been working for over the last few months. Not a face I particularly wanted to see ever again, even if I live to see my half-millennium. For a start, his face looked like something from the Stone Age. Sava, as I was privileged to call him, had a heavy-jawed, slab-like face. Beneath close cropped hair, his deep-set brown eyes glared at the world as if peering out from a cave. His nose had been broken at some point and badly reset. As always, his neural implant was broadcasting nothing so it was like he was from a primitive era or something.

The guy was a true Russian from old Earth itself. From the Galactoweb, I knew he came from the city of Arkhangelsk in the far frozen north of that country. You'd have to be tough to survive that, even if you were the son of the Governor. Sava had worked hard, risen to very near the top but then he'd fallen out with the current Tsar's advisers at some point in his murky past and spent time in a labour camp. But anyone thinking he was some brutal bruiser would be mistaken as Saveliy Yemelyanovich Fedoseyev was now the sole controller of SYF Inc., an interplanetary military-industrial business conglomerate.

However, he had been out for years now and back in the Tsar's good books. His powerful, caveman's body was clad in an expensive subfusc business suit of impeccable cut that made him appear that he had a nodding acquaintance with civilisation. It was dove grey and flecked with discreet flecks of silver thread. A perfectly knotted cravat with a ruby stick-pin glinting in it encircled his neck. It was

hard to imagine those calloused hands tying that knot. I guessed he employed a valet to dress him.

Despite the amount of alcohol he'd already taken on board, Sava, seemed stone-cold sober. What is it with Russians and alcohol? Do they drink vodka with their mother's milk? Don't answer that.

"One last drink – to celebrate our mutual success, yes," Sava said. Even through my neural-translator, his voice was heavily accented. Now I'd got my bonus, I'd have to upgrade to one of the later models.

The bar-bot set up fresh glasses and I watched as he expertly poured two fingers of golden Laphroaig into the crystal glasses.

Sava lifted his. "To success – and a safe journey home," he toasted.

We clinked glasses in that age-old ritual and then Sava drained his in one swallow. I had more respect for the spirit and sipped mine. To success. That was a good toast and Sava had been successful once again. Very successful. A winner not a loser.

Mind you, despite everything, I came out ahead, so who am I to complain?

Some months earlier, I had first met Saveliy Yemelyanovich Fedoseyev. My job is erratic. Although I describe myself as an interplanetary recovery agent, I'm also open to other offers. The boss of the agency I'm contracted to asked me to book immediate passage to Batavia VII. If you've never been, that's a paradise world of

endless islets, atolls and reefs sprinkled like sparkling sugar crystals over azure oceans. I was fortunate as it wasn't many parsecs away from where I was and a stellar-liner was on its way there. So I booked passage and after only two monkey-saddle hyper-jumps, a week later we were in Batavia VII's system.

Monkey-saddle? It describes how the star-ship's drive warps the contours of space to fling the craft through illimitable billions of kilometres of vacuum. Like, in reality, how a monkey's saddle would need a raised part to accommodate the animal's tail. The star-craft 'slides' down that part before gaining sufficient momentum to 'leap' through space. That's the explanation the crew give us lubbers, anyway. In reality, it involves complex mathematics, astro-physics and 5D navigation. Also, – can you imagine the difficulties in riding a monkey with a saddle on its back?

As always, we emerged from hyper-jump in the outer reaches of the system, far away from any world. As you know, it's for our safety as it would be a disaster if we came out within a planet or moon – instant death for us. Equally, it's bad for a world if a starship comes out of monkey-saddle hyper-jump too close. Something to do with hyper-jump waves disrupting the molecular structure of any solid object. As a minimum, it causes earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons and massive electrical storms. In the beginning, before hyper-jumps were fully understood, there was a series of terrible disasters. Krakatoa was a storm in a teacup by comparison.

However, coming out in the vacuum of deep space means that these disruptive waves are nullified. So we had a sub-light speed tour of Batavia's system to enjoy before we reached beautiful Batavia VII. The sun, Batavia, is a F-type yellow-white main sequence star which is somewhat larger and hotter than Earth's sun. It has an extensive solar system, but nothing out of the ordinary. There's a string of hot, barren

rocky worlds between the sun and Batavia VII itself. That's why it's numbered seven. These are sparsely populated by hermits, miners, prison colonies and adventurous explorers.

Beyond Batavia VII there are two large gas giants both with numerous moons. As we passed by the larger – a pinkish, greenish sphere – one of its moons sailed across the surface looking like a black disc. An impressive sight which we watched from our viewscreens for several minutes before going onto other things.

Now we were reconnected, on the ship's Galactoweb, I studied details of the main world, Batavia VII itself. Most planets out in Orion's Arm are pretty grim – not so long ago, I'd rescued some tycoon's son called Âgustin from a gloomy, rain-lashed, tide-locked world called Hancox 1. It wasn't any place I'd be hurrying back to. Especially as it was infested with Krillaz – a genetically modified terror weapon splicing together the worst of many species to come up with a horror worse than your worst nightmare. They're hi-man-sized rats – to which has been added the viciousness of a weasel, the fearlessness of a wolverine, gorilla-like arms and the iron jaws of a hyena. And they come in massed swarms.

Together with a group of managers on a team-bonding exercise, I'd rescued the foolish Âgustin and collected my reward. Despite our advanced weaponry, all the managers had fallen to the Krillaz talons and jaws which shows how tough these monsters are. I shuddered at the memory.

However, Batavia VII is nothing like that hell-hole. Like I said, it's one of those so-called paradise worlds. It has small polar ice-caps, leaving the rest of the world covered in warm, briny oceans, apart from scattered island archipelagos. The

temperature over most of the world varies between twenty and thirty Celsius with zephyr-like breezes. There's so many beaches ranging from developed to unspoiled with plenty of fishing. The most popular game fish is the fast moving spike-harpon – a dangerous predator.

But I wasn't here for sea-fishing. I had other fish to fry, as the saying goes. I was here for work and I didn't think I'd get much time to check out the delights of Batavia VII. I took my meals in my cabin and later that day, we were in orbit around Batavia VII. Looking through the viewscreens in the main assembly area, I was strangely affected. The oceans varied from deep blue, through shades of deep azures to turquoise green in shallow areas. The scattered islands glistened white in the sun and, logging onto the Galactoweb I watched clips of the beautiful people, both locals and tourists, enjoying themselves.

The shuttle craft docked and we all trooped on board. It was only a short flight down to the spaceport. As the shuttle pulled away from the interplanetary spacecraft, a little boy asked his mother why the "big ship" couldn't land. If he'd taken the trouble to look out the porthole, it would have been blindingly obvious why.

The spacecraft had been made from a rocky asteroid. Yes, an asteroid. Handles like a brick and can't operate in any kind of atmosphere but in its natural environment of deep space, that doesn't matter. A vast, rocky moonlet at least a kilometre long had been hollowed out and fitted with engines, a power plant and life support systems, cargo bays, passenger and crew living accommodation, a command bridge, a shielded computer room, thousands of kilometres of electronics. Everything a modern spacecraft needs. Portholes pierced its side making little pin points of light illuminating an array of spikes radiating out from its craggy, lumpy surface. Some

were sensors, radar and the like, others radio and x-ray transponders and receivers and still others were weaponry.

Although a cargo/merchant craft and in no way a military vessel, it still needed to be able to defend itself against pirates who sometimes preyed on vulnerable ships coming out of hyper-jump. That said, the region around Batavia VII was a well-patrolled, safe area. It's more the frontiers of space or near worlds where law and order has broken down that you have to be careful. And there's a surprising number of them. Keeps me busy, I suppose.

My mind occupied with watching the vast asteroid-craft recede behind us, we entered Batavia VII's atmosphere. The shuttle slowed, switched on its anti-gravity repellers and we coasted down through a beautifully lit, brilliant blue sky to the space-port. The port itself had been built on an artificial island as nowhere on this world was large enough to handle streamlined starships that were capable of negotiating atmospheric conditions and landing here.

The shuttle touched down, we disembarked and went through customs and disinfection. They don't want any off-world bugs getting a toe-hold here and disrupting the natural ecosystem. Then I was free and clear.

I stood there in the nu-coral arrivals hall. Everyone's neural implants was broadcasting like crazy so I filtered them out of my vision and took no notice like I ignored all the cleaning-bots, porter-bots and suchlike. Then I saw the driver who had come to pick me up. Lavrentiy Semyonovich Norin his name was and he looked less like a chauffeur or cabbie than anyone I'd ever seen. I saw that he was only broadcasting the very basics about himself – nothing about his past – so that

strengthened my belief that the man was some sort of military Special Forces. Not Star Marines, not Praetorian Guard, not Special Air-Space Services, not Trident Force. Nothing wimpy or effeminate like those ultra-tough, elite formations. No, he looked like he could eat them for breakfast and then ask for seconds.

Had to be Russian with a name like that – and from his pallid skin that the sun would never be kind to, I guessed he was a genuine, one hundred per cent Russian from old Mother Russia on Earth itself. Unless he came from one of their Gulag Colonies.

Lavrentiy Semyonovich Norin looked my way and I instantly blanked my thoughts. If he was originally from Russian Special Forces then he was probably equipped to detect thoughts that weren't even being broadcast. Fixing a smile on my face, I made my way through the tourists looking around themselves.

"Hi – I'm Vic Vargo," I said extending my hand and giving my friendliest grin.

Norin looked at me with utter contempt. Now, I've been in some tough spots – and not just that hell-hole of Hancox 1 – and fought my way out. Remember to ask me about DarkWorld one day. Or don't. That was weird. I've killed many times and almost been killed more times than I like to remember. I've been scared and terrified as well. I think – unsurprisingly I've paid to have my most traumatic memories erased. Yet, compared with Lavrentiy Semyonovich Norin I felt as dangerous as a three year old toddler.

It wasn't his build as he wasn't some over-developed man-mountain. Nor was he draped with weaponry – not that he'd be allowed in the space-port if he was. He wore a plain, though well-cut, charcoal business suit teamed with a sober cravat.

However, glancing at the suit out of the corner of my eye I noticed the subtle but tell-tale sheen of lightweight Kevlar threads running through it.

No, it was in his cold, grey eyes and the way he balanced his body on the balls of his feet ready to react immediately to any threat. This hi-man was one tough dude and he didn't need to advertise the fact. All the same, I figured that under his suit, there was more than one Special Forces holo-tattoo.

Still without speaking, Norin – as I shall call him from now on as Russian names are too long, led me out of the terminal buildings to an area reserved for VIPs' hover-cars. His attitude was starting to irritate me a little as I'd been hired by his boss to take on a mission. Wondering how to get through to Norin, I said one word. "Cheka?"

That took him by surprise and a flicker of reassessment came into those chill eyes before his lids lowered and the look of contempt returned. I was right – at some point in his career, Norin had worked for the Russian secret police. Many of their elite forces have, as brutal repression is part of daily life in the Tsar's dominions. Told me all I needed to know – Norin was definitely a man to beware of. He'd take a life with as little compunction as I would have squashing a poisonous bug. And that made his boss, Saveliy Yemelyanovich Fedoseyev, equally a man to be careful of dealing with.

Because you don't become an oligarch unless you're by far and away the toughest guy on the block.

CHAPTER 2. SAVELIY YEMELYANOVICH

FEDOSEYEV

My senses on high alert, I slipped into the passenger seat of Norin's hover-car. It had that new-car aroma of leather, carpet and warm plastic. Not the stench of old blood, vomit and dead bodies that I half expected. To be honest, I thought an oligarch's henchman would have something incredible but it was merely a luxury Mercedes sedan. That said it lifted slower than I expected so I figured it was well armoured under its vanilla exterior. Norin took it up to cruising height and speed and then let the auto-pilot do the rest as the hover-car weaved its way through dense traffic in between the high-rise condos.

You want a brief description of this paradise world? Not that it's important but here goes. If you want to really experience it, then look it up on the Galactoweb or, even better, save up your Hydrans and go experience it for yourself. The Mercedes glided over the glittering pink and white nu-coral high-rises that made up the port of Verrassa. Land is at a premium on Batavia VII so up is the only way to go.

Beyond the ranks of high-rises, the endless seas stretched in an aquamarine expanse under equally azure skies marred only by contrails from shuttles or aeroplanes heading to or from the space-port. Looking down I saw many pleasure craft out on the water, their wakes glittering white behind them as they turned and spun. Pristine snowy-white beaches fringed the land edged with imported Earth palms

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