



Hybrids

Volume 1: Trouble

Jennie Dorny

Chapter 1: Meeting

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Space—Aboard Freight Omniliner Nuong III*

“Looking for this?”

The handsome white guy holding the straps of Theo’s dirty bag smirked, oozing booze and liquid charm. He gripped her elbow and forced her to her feet. Freight-ship pilots gathered around them in the lounge bar to watch.

“What do we have here?” The pack leader punctuated his words with knuckle-punches to her chest. His brown pal with the red scarf jeered; the other white man picked his teeth. “A bald, stinking junkie ... You’re not allowed to wear that jacket anymore!”

Her stay with the Nexus street fighters had taught her a thing or two, but days constantly watching her back had weakened her. She steeled herself.

She wrenched her arm away, lost her balance, tripped against the corner of a low table and crashed to the ground. She rolled over, drew her knife from inside her boot and faced her assailants.

A short black man with eerie light-gray eyes made a pass for her on the left and she scratched him, slashing his hand and wrist. He howled. The leader pulled his own glittering blade out and threw his weapon from hand to hand, grinning. He watched her. A heavy-set brown man with a spider tattoo taking up half his face lunged at her from the right. She sidestepped him. Red-Scarf and Toothpick double-teamed her. They grabbed her by the arms and threw her, face down, against the scratchy, stained carpet. Clutching her knife, she curled into a tight ball.

“Tell your friends to leave the bum alone or I’ll break your arm.”

Theo peeked from behind a protective elbow: a lithe, tanned woman straddled the leader’s back; she gripped his throat with one hand while the other wrenched his arm at a strange angle.

“Go to hell!” He snarled as he tried to unseat her. The auburn-haired woman didn’t budge and raised his arm higher. He howled. Short-Guy and Spider-Tattoo snickered. Toothpick and Slanted-Eyes’ heavy boots found their mark each time they hit her body.

“Tell them to stop hurting the bum!”

Handsome guy laughed. “I like the way you ride me!”

Male freight pilots hooted. Hands clapped. Female pilots booed.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you!”

His arm bone snapped. He yelled. She jumped off his back as he crumpled to his knees. The woman eyed the other pack members. Toothpick and Short-Guy abandoned Theo and joined Spider-Tattoo and Red-Scarf to encircle the woman.

Theo pushed herself to her knees.

Spider-Tattoo flew past her and his head crashed against a table. He groaned. Cheers and more clapping. He lay unmoving.

The woman turned towards Toothpick. He raised his hands in surrender and stepped back. Laughter erupted from a group of female pilots who were eating dinner. They banged their mugs and hooted.

Red-Scarf lunged at the woman from behind and grabbed her. She dropped her weight and hit his head with her elbows in a single deft motion.

He tried to grab her again and this time she pulled his fingers and rotated out of his hold before kicking him in the groin. Groaning, he collapsed. She quirked an eyebrow at Short-Guy. He shook his head. Toothpick helped the pack leader to his feet.

Amid boos and shouts, Theo’s pack of attackers left the lounge.

The woman held out her hand and Theo clasped it. Her fingers were cool and her grip strong. She picked up Theo’s bag from the floor.

“Your cuts need to be cleaned.”

“I’m fine. I’ll be all right.”

The woman raised her piercing blue eyes to Theo. “Don’t give me that kind of talk.” Her low voice carried a faint accent. “You’re a woman. You’re hurt, and I’m taking care of you.”

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A few minutes later, Theo stood in a spacious suite that shimmered like a sunlit blue aquarium. On the walls, virtual fish swam among rocks and seaweed.

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” The small woman chuckled. “I earned some money and gave myself a treat. Why don’t you sit down over here so I can check your bruises?”

Theo stepped back until she hit the door. “What do you want with me?”

“My name is Ashta Coral. What about you?”

Theo longed for a warm shower.

“Perhaps you’d like to use the bathroom,” Ashta said as if reading her mind. “I’m scheduled for practice in the sports facility. Why don’t you relax a bit on your own?”

“I don’t take charity.”

Ashta picked up a towel and a pair of gym tights from an open backpack on the floor. “Do as you like. If you want to go, go. If you’d like to rest for a while, you’re welcome. You can use my bathroom, and you’ll find a medical kit in the top drawer of the cupboard. There’s food in the fridge. And even an extra bed across from the bathroom. See you around.”

Theo almost followed her host out. But the calm beckoned to her. She unzipped her Exploplan jacket, pulling it off.

She stood naked in front of the mirror inside the bathroom: what had possessed Ashta to leave her alone? Her bruised and blood-smearred face horrified her. The rest of her body was less of a mess thanks to the wide strip of cloth wrapped around her breasts and upper torso and her thick, shield-like Exploplan jacket. She checked her ribs for fractures and, much to her relief, found none; she didn't want to re-live the sense of frailty she had felt when she had cracked a rib after leaving Nexus.

She had lost weight since the beginning of her trip. Not to mention her hair, which she had shaved, and her brown skin, which she had darkened to avoid recognition. What should she do? The need to feel like herself again—even for a short spell—won out, and she scrubbed herself clean.

When she emerged from the bathroom, she devoured some fish delicacies she found and gulped down half a bottle of her favorite drink, apple sissli.

She set the alarm on the digital clock by the extra bed and lay down for a nap.

Theo jerked awake. Where was she? Her clothes were clean and neatly folded on a chair next to the bed. The time made no sense.

She got dressed and went in search of her host.

Ashta was eating at the table at the other end of the suite. "I'm having lunch. Will you join me?"

A sparkling dark red suit covered her entire body, and she had gathered her straight hair in a green band.

"Lunch?"

"You slept twenty hours through. You must've been exhausted, because I'm rather noisy."

Theo sat across from Ashta and served herself a bowl of steaming seaweed soup. “I’m leaving afterwards,” she said.

“You don’t need to. There’s room enough for both of us.”

Ashta’s calm demeanor reminded Theo of two of her mother’s friends—Kilu particularly, because Nujise was more fun than quiet. She laughed a lot.

“How did you know I was a woman?” The question bugged her. “You’re the first person who’s even guessed.”

Ashta spread green paste on a slice of bread and handed it to her. “Something in the way you held yourself. Don’t worry, your disguise is perfect. Strapping your breasts must be uncomfortable, though.”

Theo drank more soup. “What made you think you could trust me here?”

“I just knew. And I was right. You didn’t slash the walls or anything like that.”

She bit into the bread, surprised by the green spread’s fishy taste. “I emptied your fridge. I drank all your apple sissli.”

“You were famished.”

“I could have attacked you in your sleep.”

Ashta shook her head. “I’m a Savalwoman. I can’t be surprised in my sleep.”

“What’s that?”

“In Eridan, where I come from, Savalwomen protect and defend.”

“You’re from Eridan?”

“Yes. I’m going home after two years abroad. What about you? Where are you heading?”

“Same place.” She stirred honey into her black tea.

“Foreigners seldom visit us. Can I ask you why you’re going over there?”

“I like your tea and your food. Maybe I’ll stay a while. But no questions.”

“Fair enough.” Ashta stood up. “Practice time for me. I’ll be back later this afternoon.”

“Mighty long practice.”

“Well, not nearly enough. I’ve lagged.” She stared into nowhere, her eyes wistful and filled with so much sadness that Theo nearly stood up to comfort her. She shook herself out of it and nodded to Theo. “See you later.”

“I bet Savalwomen never show their weak side to anyone. They’d be appalled at what you’re doing right now, taking me in when you’ve no idea who I am.”

Ashta’s face hardened. Theo stood up, her chair falling soundlessly on the carpet, and drew her knife.

The Savalwoman raised her hands. “We’re not enemies. If you want to test your strength or your fighting spirit, try someone else. I won’t fight you.”

“Why not?” Theo hated her shaky voice’s anguish. “Am I not a worthy opponent for you?”

“You are. I admire you. But why quarrel with me? I don’t want to hurt you. You’re a friend to me. I never fight my friends.”

“Even when you practise?”

“Mock fights? We do that all the time.”

“Then practise with me.”

She put her knife on the table. “Fine.”

Theo helped Ashta push the furniture against the walls. They removed their shoes and faced each other in the center of the room.

“The rule is that each has five minutes to catch the other and place her into a death grip, head on the ground, arms around the neck,” Ashta said. “If in five minutes the trick isn’t done, the attack reverses to the other person. Like this ...”

The first round went fast. Ashta caught her easily. Theo tried to bring Ashta down with no luck. When it was Ashta's turn again, Theo ducked twice before she lost. Each time she launched her own attack, the smaller woman escaped, even though she reproduced her opponent's own feints. Theo refused to relent. She persisted. Finally, Ashta raised an arm.

"Time to rest."

Theo collapsed on the carpet, her arms stretched cross-like, and closed her eyes, panting.

"Are you all right?" The Savalwoman leaned over her, concern in her eyes.

"By the Winds, were you trying to punish me?"

"Punish you? What are you talking about?"

"What I said about Savalwomen."

"You wanted to practise with me."

"Not for hours."

"I know you don't trust me, yet believe me when I say that you're a wonderful opponent.

It's been the most interesting fight I've had in years."

"Really?"

Ashta nodded as she wiped her own sweaty face.

"Well, let's go on. I like it!"

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