

Jake gets a call from his girlfriend Mimi after her arrest for protesting slavery on the newly colonized planet of Rossa. Mimi disappears and Jake leads his spy team on operations to find her. But they are up against clever and resourceful crime lords and landowners who will do anything to protect their investments in slavery. Including going after Jake himself.

The first five chapters are available for reading on www.crayne.com.

Praise for the novels

"I was going to finish this tomorrow but I just couldn't stop reading. Great story."

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"Solid sci-fi spy thriller. One thing I particularly liked is that many of the supporting characters are well developed, atypical, and just plain fun. ...I recommend it to anyone who likes sci-fi, thriller and/or [espionage] combinations. I'll definitely be buying the sequel."

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"...you hit the ground running and you're compelled to turn the page. I'll conclude with a final warning to potential readers of this book: Jake Dani is addictive."

- R. Murray, speculative fiction writer

"...a beautifully woven rug, every piece of the story, yet complex, fits perfectly with the other pieces."

- T. Khan

"The story drew me in early and maintained its pull on my imagination as the plot included many twists and turns and surprises. I especially liked the way [the author] established a link between earth and the planet Rossa, and the fact that people travelled back and forth between the two. This picture grounded the story in a level of reality not common in some science fiction stories. I like the way [the author] developed the key characters and created webs of intrigue. I found the story to be powerful and entertaining."

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Novels by Victory Crayne

Freedom

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Freedom (Chapters 1-5)

By

Victory Crayne

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Chapter 1

“Is this Jake Dani?” screamed a female voice in my ear implant amid voices in the background.

“Yes,” I replied. “You don’t have to yell.”

“You've got to help me!” screamed Mimi Mikado.

“Where are you?” I replied to my lover.

“I'm in jail.”

“Would you stop yelling?”

“I can’t. There’s too much noise here.”

That explained it. The voices echoed off cement walls and metal. I tapped my nostril. “Comm, lower incoming by fifteen decibels. Increase outgoing by ten decibels.” The sound in my ears dropped.

“Why are you in jail?”

“I got arrested at a protest march. Some protesters went overboard, and it got a little violent. The police arrested all of us. I didn't do anything!”

I smiled at the efficiency of my comm.

“Then you should have no problem.”

“You've got to help me!”

“I'll be there as soon as I can. I'm south of the city of Zor right now. Should be there by nightfall.”

The pair of hot dogs on the plate in front of me looked appetizing. I wondered if I could get them in a take-out package, not that it’d make any difference. The train wouldn’t leave Sam Waterman’s Rest Stop until the others boarded. Besides, we were hours away from the jail in Zor.

“I don't know if I can wait that long,” added Mimi. “This is terrible.”

“Protesters must learn patience. Rome wasn't built in a day and you can't dismantle it in a day.”

“I don’t need another history lesson. I just need outta here!”

“All right. I’ll get there as soon as I can. It may take a few hours though.” I tapped my nose twice to disconnect, followed by another bite of hot dog.

Some folks had weak nostril muscles and moved their lips upward to move their nostrils. Or they tapped their nose if their hands were free.

Thank heavens for drones flying high over Waterman's and other rural areas of York. At least I could use my comm this far from the capital city of York.

I sat on one of three long benches. Fellow travelers took up most of the seats. Families. Lone males and females. Screams of laughter came from behind my back and I turned to see dozens of kids running around and playing on the merry-go-rounds, slides, swings, and colored tunnels.

The local sun, Gordon, baked us with its heat.

The wind gusted so I covered the edge of my paper plate with my mug of beer.

On the side opposite the children, two dogs barked at the tall weeds. Several boys played baseball on that side. One guy got up and walked toward the dogs. "Dingo! Shut up!"

But Dingo and his smaller canine friend kept up their incessant yapping while looking at the weeds even though both were on leashes. I wondered what they saw.

"I hear there are screechies around here," said an old gray haired woman with a white scarf over her head. She spoke to an old man sitting across from her. His comb-over hair flew in the breeze.

The man shook his head. "I doubt if they'll come this close to people."

Screechies were native to the planet Rossa. The damned reptiles reminded me of the prehistoric velociraptors of old Earth. They walked on two legs and looked like overgrown chickens but with smooth skin rather than feathers. The adults got to a foot and a half tall and had teeth. Lots of them. They got their name from their blood-curling screams when they charged their prey, to freeze their unfortunate victims in fear.

I took another bite of hot dog. With one hand on my plate to keep it from blowing in the wind, I used the other to take a sip of beer. A scream of delight came from behind me and I turned.

One girl ran into the weeds to escape four small pursuers.

Then I spotted something moving in the high grass fifty yards beyond her. The V-shape of the disturbance in the grass kept advancing toward the girl.

Then it dawned on me. A favorite tactic of screechies was to have one of them divert attention while the pack—they always hunted in packs—inched closer to their prey from the other direction.

The barking dogs alerted us, all right. But away from the real danger.

I rose to my feet, cupped my hands over my mouth, and yelled to the children, "Screechies! Get back to the benches!"

I lifted my legs over the bench seat and ran toward the kids, fearing I would be too late. Already, most of the children had run to the benches. In seconds, I ran past the playground and into the grasses.

Where the heck was the little girl?

Without thinking of the danger, I knew I had to get to her before the animals did. I ran straight toward where I had last seen her, six feet into the grass.

Sure enough, I found her there. She crouched with her face toward the playground. I doubt if she had any idea the danger she was in. I repeated my earlier warning and pointed toward the adults.

“Screechies! Get back to the benches!”

As I got to her, she looked up at me with wide open eyes.

Good. She was afraid.

“Hurry!” I yelled and put out my arms.

She stood and reached out her own.

I picked her up and ran back toward the benches. Just then, I heard a trademark screech. They’d spotted us.

She was heavy for a tike, maybe fifty pounds, and dressed in a plaid skirt with white shirt. She wrapped her legs around my torso and I held her with two arms as I ran. With my extra Binger strength, it didn’t take long to get to the edge of the line of men facing me. Several men had grabbed sticks, knives, whatever they could, as they ran toward me. One older man held his cane up in a menacing pose.

When I got to the men, I paused and turned. I looked back to see the grasses part as a dozen of the reptiles came into view.

The screechies stopped just short of the playground toys and stared at us. A woman ran up to me and took the little girl from my arms. A man came up beside me with a pair of baseball bats. He handed one to me and I joined the group of men standing guard at the edge of the playground near the benches.

The advance guard of the reptiles soon swelled to dozens. They had long, jagged teeth. We had a few clubs, knives, and forks. Not a fair match.

I waved the bat in the air and screamed as I advanced at the reptiles. The other men joined me in a loud chorus. There were twenty of us men versus dozens of the creatures. I walked toward them and the line of men moved with me.

Two men with white aprons around their waists came up to us with shotguns. They fired both guns at the wild animals, cutting down the ones in front in splatters of skin and blood.

The lead reptile let out a squawk and ran back into the tall grass. The others followed suit.

I lowered my bat and stopped yelling. We watched as the last of the little reptiles vanished out of sight. I turned toward the other men.

“We scared 'em!” said one man.

The others soon joined in a loud cheer and we walked back toward the waiting women and children. I spotted the proprietor, Sam Waterman himself. I recognized his face from the billboard above the restaurant.

He dropped the point of his shotgun, broke the gun to expose the three barrels, pulled out the shiny shells, and reloaded from pockets in his apron. He had a bald head, a huge belly and wore a white apron with the words "Waterman's Rest Stop." Below that, food stains marred an otherwise white.

I approached him.

"You need a fence around the playground area," I said.

"Costs money," he replied.

I shook my head. "It will cost you a lot more if word gets out that families who stop here could lose their children to those damn screechies."

He raised his head, with his eyes opened wide, and he nodded before he walked back to the front door of his restaurant. A taller and younger man, wearing a food-stained apron and carrying his own shotgun, followed him. The two looked alike, even in the way they walked.

Must be his son.

I made my way back to my seat. In my rush, I had left the beer off the plate and the mug stood alone. I spotted the plate turned over on the ground. I picked it up only to discover my hotdog covered in dirt.

Oh well.

The voices of the families echoed in my ears.

I pondered buying another hotdog.

As I got up to walk toward the restaurant, several men came up to my bench and laid plates of fresh food, obviously purchased from the restaurant and still in their wrappers, in front of me.

"Thanks, buddy," said one. "You saved my daughter."

Several other men did the same and thanked me for saving their children. I looked up to the little girl I had rescued. Her mother waved her arm at me. I waved back as I smiled.

All in a day's work, ma'am.

Chapter 2

When the train whistle blew, dozens of folks rose from their seats on the benches and rushed to get on board.

This train had five cars in it, each with wings on top that extended three feet beyond the edge of the car. The wings collected energy from the sun Gordon to help power the train. Fuel cells provided most of the power during the night but the solar cells on top helped during the day. The wings bent at an angle to the wind to give lift whenever the wind was favorable. A third “wing” rose from the center of each car to give extra push and changed direction by computer whenever the wind shifted.

After finishing as much as I could eat of the donated food, I got up to join the line entering the car from Las Seille, a city on the southern edge of York. My car was almost full. Most looked tired from a long trip.

I chose a window seat on the west side of the train. The sun Gordon rose in the east, as on Earth, and the right side was much hotter. Most of the windows on that side had shades pulled. Most of the travelers next to the windows bowed their heads in sleep.

Must have had too much food for lunch.

I wondered why the train didn’t have air conditioning and then realized the government owned it. Air costs money.

My shirt was damp with sweat.

What the hell.

I leaned forward and pulled off my blue jacket, revealing my brown bopum-leather shoulder holster on my white shirt. I stood and placed the jacket in the overhead bin.

A big guy saw me as he boarded and came up to my row. Then he took off his gray jacket and stowed it in the bin above our seats before sitting next to me. I couldn't tell if he was a cop, a private dick like myself, or a hired gun. Made no difference though. We looked like twins with our shoulder holsters exposed.

He offered his hand. “Richard Brown.”

“Cop?”

He grinned and nodded as he took the aisle seat.

Brown was close to my height of six foot one. His skin tone was dark and he wore his hair short. Wisps of gray marbled the hair above his ears.

He didn’t mention where he worked, but cops can be shy about that. I gave him my PI business card. I never knew when I’d get a job so I handed them out like candy.

The train lurched forward.

Brown tapped his nose and I heard him talk to someone he must have known well. He finished the tag with “Love ya too,” and tapped his nostril to end the tag.

I said, “Wife?”

He nodded. “She’s visiting her mom and dad in La Seille.”

La Seille was the main port of York on the south side of the continent of Norda. So far, the main route between Zor and La Seille was on the Zor-La Seille railroad. Owned by the government of York, the railroad passed through the scenic Five Fingers Lakes north of La Seille.

I had fished those lakes a few years back, but all I caught were scorba, the Rossan counterpart to eels. Scorba lived in the lakes, river beds, and swamps of the tropical areas of the planet. The only problem came after catching them. The bastards had prickly skin and fought on the hooks. But once you peeled their skin off, the meat inside was white and tasty. Healthy for you, too, I hear.

Crime ran rampant in La Seille and smuggling stood at the top of the list. With tariffs so high, smugglers could sell goods from the large southern continent of Braco and the overpopulated areas of Osin. People from the eastern seaboard of Asia found the climate and terrain of the eastern side of the northern continent of Norda to be familiar. Slavery was popular in Osin and most workers got little in the way of daily wages. So goods from Osin were cheaper than those made by Yorkans. Tariffs were high on goods produced outside of York. Hence the smuggling trade.

“La Seille is behind us,” I added.

“I saw what you did back at the rest stop,” he said. “That took courage to run out into the tall grass when you knew screechies were there.”

I shrugged. “Just standing in harm’s way.” He would know about that, being a cop.

He asked, “Been on Rossa long?”

“Years. Worked for LAPD before that.”

“Why are you here?”

“Made too many mistakes, I guess. My biggest in Los Angeles was arresting a son of a bitch who drove all over the road. When I stopped him, I saw he wore a clown's outfit. Maybe it was the white and red face that fooled me. What I didn't know was his father was the mayor. Politics reared its ugly head there like it does everywhere else and I soon faced demotion to a beat cop on the street or cashing out. I chose the latter.

“I went private practice as an investigator. But luck was not in my cards and I soon faced another hard choice. After I uncovered evidence that the boss of the southern LA syndicate was dealing in drugs in a big way, to the tune of millions a month, the boss gave me a choice. Push up daises or quit the Force and emigrate to the only

other planet where humans walked. That didn't seem much of a choice and I picked emigration."

Brown said, "Makes sense to me. I'd do the same."

He added as he looked at my business card, "I see you work as a PI. Do much of the rough work?"

"Nope." Even though the cops here are understaffed and most PIs end up working as muscles to enforce private justice, I stirred clear of that. I do mostly domestic surveillance—if you know what I mean.

He grinned. "So you tail errant husbands or wives?"

"Guys, usually."

"I've been thinking about making a career change. Profitable?"

"Oh, I get by. Now and then I catch a lucrative case."

"Workin' now?"

I shook my head. "Nah. Just got paid for some work for a rancher."

"Wife strayed?"

"Can't tell ya," I replied and winked.

We shared grins.

"Think I'll take a nap," he said.

He stood and retrieved his jacket from the overhead storage and looked down at me. "Want yours?"

A nap in the heat after a heavy lunch sounded nice. "Sure."

After he handed me my jacket, he set his chair back, put his jacket over his chest, and closed his eyes.

I reclined my seat and leaned on my left side to keep my gun away from the other fella. When we traveled on the bumpy bridge over Lake Geneve, I woke.

Sometimes the wildness of this planet annoyed me.

I looked out the window to see tall trees. On one branch rested a nest of small four-wingers. A larger version landed nearby. Something dangled from its beak but this far away and my moving so fast, I couldn't make it out. In seconds, the four-winger passed out of sight.

Humans first visited Rossa a year before war broke out with the mercons on Durr, a couple dozen years before I came out of my mother's womb. I was grateful for that war because Dr. Bing got DNA from the blood of captured mercons and began his experiments to isolate the source of the aliens' high intelligence and strength. He changed twenty-six different single-nucleotide polymorphism, or SNP, sections of human

DNA in attempts to create enhanced intelligence humans, with financial backing from the new United Earth Federation. He infused a few of the SNP snippets into contributed embryos to create Bingers.

My father, Petro Dani, came out of his later experiments.

That was before word leaked out that some human babies had DNA of the feared mercons. That made a big splash in the media and Dr. Bing went underground. Ever since the war, we Bingers have been hiding.

Chapter 3

From the seats in front of me, I overheard a man and a woman arguing.

“I tell ya it’s the damned Bingers. Those bastards are out to screw us in every way.”

“Oh, Larry. You always blame them or the mercons for everything. When are you gonna learn?”

“Blanche, I tell ya, the damned Bingers are behind this slavery thing. They figure it will weaken us when there’s an invasion. And believe me, an invasion is coming.”

“There you go again. Talking about an invasion. Don’t you read the news? The mercons have destroyed their home world. The few here on Rossa are the tame ones.”

“Well, you mark my words. It’s coming.”

From overhead speakers, a male voice announced, “Our train will arrive at the Zor-Franken Airport in twenty minutes.”

I peered out my window as we passed the tall fence that surrounded Zor to keep the local wild animals out. We passed through on a high bridge where I saw a gigantic double-winged plane heading for a landing at the airport in the distance. Before we got to the airport itself, I looked outside the right windows and saw a cluster of large buildings in the distance. The Zor-Franken Indentured Workers Compound. We locals called it the Slave Hut.

Our minds work in strange ways.

Most folks on Earth were not wealthy. They did not live in well-developed nations. Most suffered lives of poverty and had old fashioned ideas on how to live their lives, including the roles of men and women, what religion they should have, and what politics they believed in. They brought those old fashioned ideas with them when they emigrated to Rossa—ideas, attitudes, values, opinions, and prejudices. In order words, their mental baggage.

All too often that meant a naïve attitude about contracts. The poor emigrants on Earth dreamt of a better life on Rossa and fell victim to scammers. Most signed indenture contracts to work for five years in exchange for their passage. Unfortunately, for most that meant slavery for life. They left the life of slavery to the greedy ones on Earth, came to Rossa, and fell victim again to slavery to the greedy ones. Nothing much changed except where they lived.

I had heard rumors of workers having their contracts resold to landowners in that building.

An image came to my mind of a scene in a movie I had seen once of the life of a slave from Africa.

#

A black man, naked and in chains, stumbled onto a stage, barely getting two feet before the chains on his ankles cut short his gait. White men in the audience bid in an auction on the man. The man's eyes stared wide open with a look of terror, not knowing what was happening to him. One man's bid won out and another white man on the edge of stage pulled on the chain to the collar around the black man's neck, yanking him off the stage.

A black woman, in tears and her eyes open wide in terror, came on the stage next. She was naked and chained too. She tried to call out to the man who had come before her but a flash of a whip on her bare behind forced a scream out of her mouth and she pulled her arms back.

Six men, fully dressed in gray suits and shirts with puffy sleeves sat at three tables four feet from the edge of the raised slave platform. The room above them was cloudy with smoke from their cigars. On the tables were tall glasses with ice and brown-colored drinks. Three of them laughed as the others bid, shaking their huge bellies.

#

I remembered their awful laughter the most.

But the movie was of the Civil War era in the old United States of America. A long time ago and far way. This was now, on Rossa. Surely such scenes would not be repeated here.

Our train turned to the right as we passed the airport and headed for a few more straight miles into the city itself. Farms and occasional houses flitted by. At this distance I could not make out the crops they grew but figured many were of corn or wheat because that is what many residents preferred.

Finally, we entered more populated areas and I got off at Grand Central Station.

Getting off my train car was quick since I had no luggage.

As I walked on the granite floor, the din of hundreds of voices echoed in my ears, interrupted by an occasional voice calling out that it was time to board a given train. They must replace the speakers though because no matter how hard I listened, I could not understand more than a few words. Maybe it was the abundance of hard surfaces.

Lights over the trains showed green as people boarded one of the six trains. My train had a red light over it and disgorged hundreds of passengers.

I headed toward the sign that read "Main Street" and walked up to the street level. I missed the escalators. The steps were still there but I had to walk up. Being government owned and with budget cuts, power to the escalators at the station had ceased a year ago.

Since the station was only three blocks from the jail, I made a detour to my car and placed my shoulder Snap and the smaller .22 Snap on my ankle in the secret

compartment in my dashboard. I'd just have to surrender both guns at the jail and that would delay my leaving with Mimi. Then I walked to the jail, feeling naked without my weapons.

On my right rose the tall Gerges Hospital, the only training hospital in Zor and the largest in the city. Dusk had come and street lights blossomed as I walked on Main Street and made a left at North Central Park Avenue. A block and a half ahead on my right loomed the dark three-story jail building.

I entered the front door and stood in line at the reception desk, situated behind thick glass windows. After a five minute wait, the two people ahead of me left and I approached the window. The woman on the other side wore a police uniform that was a size too small for her. Her dark neck overflowed her collar.

"I'm here to post bail for Mimi Mikado."

The woman, whose name plate read "Antonia," stared at her monitor and her fingers tapped keys. When they paused, she looked at me for the first time and said, "Her arrest was for a misdemeanor and her detention is up for arraignment tomorrow. But you can post five hundred sols and she can be released until then."

Feeling flush with the recent deposit into my account, I pressed a few keys on my comm and placed it to the payment plate on my left.

The chubby Antonia looked at her monitor. In seconds, I heard the chatter of a printer. She tore off a piece of paper from the printer and placed the receipt on the metallic tray under the glass shield.

"Take this receipt with you. Go through the door."

On the other side of the door with the words "Female" over it, stood two male and two female guards in police uniforms in front of a conveyor belt.

I knew many of the jail personnel, having been there several times with my detective buddy Deek Tanny, as he booked a woman. Most of the ladies were there for assaulting their hubbies or hitting a dirtbag who grabbed too many asses in a bar.

The female side of the jail was smaller than the male side. I walked down several hallways and through another door.

Beyond the door I saw three cells, each with several women, some sitting and some standing.

I presented the receipt to the chubby female guard sitting by the door.

She read it and yelled to the cages, "Mimi Mikado!"

My gal stepped forward. One guard placed her comm next to the door and it opened. Mimi's hair was a mess and so was her makeup. She looked down in the dumps.

The guard checked the photo on her own comm and looked at Mimi before letting her out of her cell and closing the door behind her.

“What took you so long?” Mimi asked as we walked to retrieve her personal possessions.

“It's a long story. Want the short version?”

She nodded.

“I got on the train to Zor as soon as I could.”

Our two guards escorted us to a barred opening. There a tired looking white woman in a police uniform sat on a stool.

“Name?” asked the woman as she looked to Mimi.

My woman said, “Mimi Mikado.”

The guard typed her name on a pad. After five seconds, she pressed her comm to a plate in front of the opening. The woman on the other side walked to the stacks behind her and returned with a deep tray and handed it to Mimi.

My gal lifted out her purse and her comm, which she put on her wrist. But before we could leave, she had to sign a form on a display acknowledging receipt of her items.

As we walked to the exit, she pressed buttons on her comm. “I've got over a hundred messages!”

“Let's get you home first so you can shower. You can check your comm in the cab.”

When we got to the front entrance, I raised my hand for a cab. Two tried to get my attention, I made a quick decision, and held the door open for Mimi. Once we were on our way, I told the automated cab, “Grand Central.”

As she checked a few of her messages, I studied her. Mimi was shorter than me at five foot six and was petite at a hundred and forty five pounds. Her eyes had the slant of a half-Japanese half-Caucasian. But she was a hundred percent mine. Well, except for the part that got excited on the anti-slavery movement. That part I had no control over.

When we entered the huge parking lot that surrounded the station, I placed my comm on a plate. The cab stopped behind my vehicle. Lights came on inside my car from the comm signal on my wrist as we approached.

Cars on Rossa still had steering wheels recessed into the dashboard and acceleration and brake pedals recessed into the floorboard, ready to pop out if the driver called for them, but most of the time, they could drive themselves. That was much safer.

We got in my vehicle.

“Car, go to Mimi's home.”

I retrieved my guns from the dashboard.

The car drove itself out of the parking spot and soon we traveled south on Ambassador Boulevard.

#

My comm vibrated with a news bulletin from Channel One.

“Car, display news.”

The telly in my car changed from a display of our progress on the streets of Zor to the anchor desk of the Channel One newsroom. I didn’t recognize the anchorman, a tall white guy with black hair, dressed in a blue suit, white shirt, and red bow tie, the latest in men’s fashions.

“A few minutes ago, an explosion and fire occurred at the headquarters of Zor Anti-slavery News.”

The image changed to show the blown out front of a store with water spraying from fire trucks into the charred office. Black soot covered up part of the sign but I made out the words “Anti-...News.” Black smoke rose above the storefront and obscured the windows of the second and third floors.

The image changed to show the view of a male reporter on the scene with fire trucks and several gawkers in the background.

“Less than a half-hour ago, a loud explosion racked this quiet business district of Zor on First Street. Someone tagged the fire department which arrived...” he looked off-camera, “twelve minutes later.”

I recognized the view and looked out the right side of my car’s window but it was too dark to see any smoke. All I could see were the glaring floodlights from the fire trucks lighting up the burning building.

“Oh my God!” exclaimed Mimi.

In her spare time Mimi was the Executive Director of the Anti-Slavery Railroad. She had an office on the third floor above the storefront. At her normal “day job,” she worked in sales for Rossan Medical Import-Exports, a major wholesaler of medical supplies from Earth.

Realizing she would want to get closer, I ordered, “Car, change destination to the Anti-Slavery News.”

We soon came to that block on First Street but police officers didn’t allow any vehicles to enter the street. As we drove past, we could see the flashing lights of fire trucks and police cars as well as the smoke lit up by floodlights.

Cars occupied every parking space on both sides of Moss Street.

“We can’t get any closer,” I said.

She stared out her passenger side window. Only when the view changed to shops and businesses on Moss Street did she turn to look at me.

I saw no tears on her face and her eyes glazed into the distance. She might have been in shock.

“Car, take us to Mimi’s home,” I ordered.

We made a U-turn at the next traffic light and headed east on Moss, passing the fire on my left.

Chapter 4

My car drove onto her driveway in the residential section of Zor and when we turned to our doors, they opened automatically.

She rushed into her bedroom and soon I heard the shower running from the kitchen. Even though I had been sitting most of the day, I felt tired too. Images of those damned screechies kept popping into my head. While Mimi refreshed herself, I fixed a drink from her cupboard. I pulled down a bottle of Yarley's, the best scotch on York and filled a glass halfway. I stopped at her refrig to add ice.

I sat in her living room on the sofa in front of table made out of the stump of an old gnarled tree as the scotch seeped through my veins. The diamond shapes on the bark of the tree showed the characteristic of the Bastard tree from the southeastern edge of York. On the table in front of me rested a vase with orange and white flowers. They must have come from Rossa because their colors were darker than the flowers I recalled from Earth. Tiny thorns lined the stems. I turned the vase and saw white Grecian figures on a brown background.

I would never think to have fresh flowers in my living room. Hers was a nice home, nicer than mine. Hers was comfortable. Mine was functional.

I'm a guy. What do you expect?

I thought back over the day's events—from the payment of my client, Mimi's tag of panic from the jail, to the moment of seeing the screechies approach their prey and my later rescue of the little girl, my conversation with the guy on the train, getting Mimi out of the jail, and the fire at Mimi's Anti-slavery Railroad.

A lot of shit had happened today. I got up to pour another glass of Yarley's.

Mimi had an oval throw rug under the coffee table covering part of her hardwood floor.

"Telly on," I said. The image came alive on her wall. I heard the shower turn off as I watched the news. Sheila Fish, my favorite anchor on Channel One News, reported on the demonstrations in front of the federal building on First Street. They started out peacefully enough with sign carriers marching in two straight lines, one coming toward the camera and one going the other way. The signs depicted images of people being beaten and living in unpainted shacks. A few signs said, "End Slavery Now!" Try as I might, I could not find Mimi among those marching.

Then protesters from the Humans Only organization came onto the scene, carrying their own signs. I read "Rossa is for Humans, not Robots!" It didn't take long for the two groups to clash. It started with yelling at each other but soon degenerated into slugging.

The doors opened on the federal building and many cops in riot gear emerged, complete with shields and batons. Protesters hit the cops and the cops hit the protesters.

I shook my head.

Sometimes I wonder if humans will ever learn.

Ten minutes later, the military arrived as members of the York Defense Force separated the two group of protesters. Soon, many of the protesters were loaded in the backs of vans with barred windows.

A report on the explosion and fire at the office of the Anti-slavery News came next. I watched as Mikail Torsch spoke from a desk, with the fire scene in the background. Maybe he was in the Channel One studio.

“There are many forms of slavery: financial, religious, even cultural. Financial slavery comes in many flavors: buying too much on credit and paying too much in finance charges to the big banks, getting into debt over your head such as buying a car, truck, or house you cannot afford, and indenture.

“The last, indenture, is insidious. It all too often becomes lifelong slavery. Indentured workers often find themselves forced to buy food, housing, and clothing from their contract owner at high prices. Which ensures they will never pay off their debt. All too often their children are born into debt and will resent them for that. Children of contract workers also don't get the quality education they need to break free of their slavery.

“Slaves also get poor quality medical care. Most are broken in their bodies by the time they've passed thirty years of slavery. The average age at death of indentured workers is thirty years after coming to Rossa. That's why the big advertisements for emigration to Rossa stress the advantages of coming at a young age. The younger folks are more easily convinced, and the employer gets more years of work out of them before they die.”

Sheila asked Torsch, “Why do you feel so strongly about slavery?”

He replied, “They have only us to speak out for them.”

Then came an alarming newscast. It started with the close image of a large tear in a fence. The male newscaster reported, “Early this morning, inspectors found this hole in the fence northeast of the airport.” He pointed to tracks on the ground.

“These are the foot prints of two large gofers. The native catlike animals broke through the fence over there.” He pointed at the broken fence in the background.

In a corner of the screen, the image of a gofer paced his cell at the zoo. The six-legged cat-like animal showed pointed teeth as it panted. Gofers got their name from “going for” any kind of prey, including humans. Like lions on Earth, males were larger than females but the females were more dangerous because they did most of the

hunting. Despite being built close to the ground like most Rossan animals, they could sprint to their top speed of twenty miles an hour in five seconds.

The one I saw in its cage looked frustrated. I would be too if the longest distance in my world was thirty feet.

“Animal trackers came to the scene soon after.” The camera view shifted to a partially eaten carcass of a horse on the ground.

“The gofers appear to have broken into the horse pen at this nearby ranch and killed one mare.” The image shifted to broken tall grasses.

“It looks like the gofers were scared off by shots fired by the rancher and may have escaped in the grasses behind me. Local police and animal trackers are busy at the scene.” Two SUVs marked with the insignia of the Zor police department sped down the path of the broken grasses. Four men with rifles on their backs held onto the top rail of their SUVs.

“We are fortunate that the gofers had not had time to pursue more human prey. A schoolhouse lies just a half mile away.” The image shifted to show the white buildings of a school in the background.

“In a related story, a greeper broke into the chicken coop of a farm on the southern edge of the city west of the airport and killed a young boy who was feeding the chickens. His body was discovered this morning by his father. Dark brown hairs on the chicken wire told the police it was a greeper.”

The scene changed to show a farmer carrying a brown sack up to the porch of a white two-story house. The bag bulged in spots and the man said, “Ma, I don't want you to remember him like this.”

The camera focused on her face as she stared at the sack, held her hands to her face, and broke out in wails and tears.

“Stay tuned as Channel One follows this story.”

The next news story focused on the Parliament Building. A reporter spoke into the camera as noisy protestors chanted and marched behind him. “Hundreds of people marched against the bill pending in Parliament.”

Signs behind him showed children in chains. Other signs read “End Child Slave Labor Now!”

The reporter continued. “The recession on Rossa has put many people out of work.” He pointed and spoke as the camera shifted to his left to show hundreds of other protestors bearing signs of ‘Don’t flood the job market with slave labor’ and ‘Slaves aren’t citizens. Send them home!’ and the simpler ‘Send the slaves home!’

“Others favor the laws against the indentured workers out of fear they will take jobs away from citizens.”

I heard footsteps coming from her bedroom so I said, “Telly off.” The wall turned white again.

#

The most gorgeous woman in the world appeared wrapped in a blue terry cloth bathrobe. On the top of her head rested a twisted yellow towel.

How the heck do women make the towel stay up there even when they bend over?

I must have been gaping because I soon felt her lips press upon mine. As she rose, I peeked down the gap in her robe to two mounds of beautiful flesh.

The heck with the news. I rose and pulled her to me. Her narrowed eyes stared up into mine. Not a word passed either of our lips.

It's funny how we humans can communicate so well without saying a word.

My dream of a happy ending got shattered when she pushed herself back from me. “We need to talk.”

“About what?”

“You told me you don’t care what happens to the slaves. I do care. A lot. I got to thinking while I was in jail. About us. Jake, we have to come to agreement on this. Either you support me or we’re through.”

Just like that. I stood dumbfounded, unable to reply. I thought over her beliefs about slavery. She was a very emotional person. If I didn’t play my cards right, I could lose her.

“Is this the thanks I get for posting your bail?”

She pulled her eyebrows closer together and looked down. But she remained silent. We stood like that for almost a minute, each lost in thought. All I wanted was peace. She wanted me to change.

Who do women do that? Why can't they let a man stay the way he is?

Her shoulders slumped and she looked up at me. “You’re right.”

Her smile told me she had changed her emotion—again.

She reached her arms up to my shoulders. The tenderness returned to her expression.

“I owe you a better thanks.”

I bent over and placed my left hand behind her and lifted. Her hundred and forty five pounds was nothing to my Binger strength.

Her left arm wrapped around my shoulders as I carried her into her bedroom.

Chapter 5

The next morning, I lay on her bed. Her head rested on my chest and her left arm lay across my body. My left arm wrapped around her back. The smell of her floral shampoo filled my nose.

I could stay here forever.

I looked out the window at a tree in her back yard. She had a house. I had an apartment. Being a spy meant I might move a lot, so I didn't want to be tied down to a house. The tree outside had bare branches that swayed with the wind. Milky clouds covered the sky.

Even though it was warm inside the house, I felt a chill so I pulled the thin linen sheet up to cover our arms. The sheet was feminine with orange and white printed flowers.

The day's events came to mind. We had business to attend to at the courthouse. If she didn't show at her trial today, she risked suffering a stronger punishment.

I moved my arm and said, "Time to get up!"

Mimi moaned and pulled away from me.

Darn. There goes Paradise.

Being naked, I hopped into the shower. One thing I liked about Mimi's place was her hot water. It came on in two seconds. She had the newer "instant hot water" heaters. My apartment used the older hot water tank method so there I had to run the shower before the water could get warm. That was a bitch in the winter when the pipes got colder overnight while I shivered and waited.

After I showered, I towel dried and wrapped the larger one around my middle before I stepped into the bedroom. My naked lover passed by me, headed for her turn under the water.

Since I spent so much time at her place, I had clothes in her closet and dresser. I put on my jeans and a white shirt. With practiced hands, I checked my Snap to make sure it was loaded with slugs and fully charged before putting it into my holster.

I didn't bother to put on my jacket since we had not eaten yet. But I raised my foot to a chair and put on my smaller ankle Snap. Both guns used .22 caliber bullets but being Snaps, they depended on a discharge of energy for a faster projectile. The damage done by a bullet depends on momentum, a combination of weight and muzzle velocity. The velocity of a smaller bullet could do as much damage to a target as a slower moving larger caliber. I preferred a Snap because it was quieter and the bullets were cheaper.

Once I got to the kitchen, I fixed scrambled eggs and toast. When I brought the juice and milk to the table, I was startled to see Mimi sitting, dressed in a blue tight dress with a peasant-style deep neck line. I had not heard her come in.

“Do you have to wear that?” she asked, looking at my holster and gun.

“Hey, what do I do if someone breaks into your home? Go to the bedroom to get my gun and leave you exposed?” I shook my head.

“Buy why would anyone break into my home?”

I looked into her eyes. “You'll have to ask them. I'm not going to risk your being hurt.”

“I think you just like carrying a gun.”

We had had this same argument many times.

After breakfast, we got into my car. With the sun Gordon lost behind clouds and wind coming in gusts, it was cool. Once inside, I said, “Car, 75 degrees.”

“Destination?” it asked.

“Courthouse,” I replied.

We parked in the four-story parking structure. Before I left the car, I placed both my Snaps in the dashboard box and sealed it. Only my hand and voice print would open it.

Crowds filled the hallway in front of court number three. There must have been a hundred people sitting or standing. I heard several muted conversations. A guard came out and rattled off a long list of names from his comm. I heard “Mikado” and stood with her.

I followed the sign that said “Visitors” and took a seat on the left side in one of the rows of wooden seats. The design was like the pews in an old church and I wondered if the government had purchased them cheap.

Mimi sat on the right side in the section for “Defendants,” along with many others. That side did most of the talking as the fellow demonstrators greeted each other.

The uniformed clerk announced, “All rise,” and we stood. Conversations stopped.

Judge Jerrine Stouter walked up in wearing black robes and took her seat high above the rest of us.

The clerk said, “Be seated.”

He opened a door and fifteen people came out. Those folks didn't make bail and had to spend the night in cells.

The clerk called out the long list of names and as each person heard his or her name, they made their way up through the small gate that separated the legal staff from the guests and defendants and stood behind the overnighters. I couldn't count them and figured they numbered close to seventy total.

“Say the word ‘present’ when you hear your name,” said the judge.

One was absent and the judge ordered a warrant for that person’s arrest. She explained the differences between pleas of guilty, no contest, and not guilty. A “No contest” plea meant the defendant didn’t admit guilt and would not go to trial. It was treated the same as a guilty plea.

Judge Stouter heard a din of “no contest” pleas. Mimi said “No contest” when her turn came. Three said “Not guilty” and were given trial dates. They left promptly.

I waited while the judge read information from her monitor before she said, “Even though your right to march in protest is assured by the First Amendment of the York Constitution, you appear to have gone beyond a simple protest and engaged in fighting. This time I find you guilty of a misdemeanor charge. If you come back here after engaging in fighting, you won’t get off so lightly.”

She looked at the nervous faces before her.

“I’m sentencing each of you to serve fifty hours of community service and to pay a fine of five hundred sols. If you’ve paid that amount in bail, then your fine is considered paid. If you could not afford the fine, then you must spend thirty days in jail. You must still serve fifty hours of community service.”

With that, she rapped her gavel on the wooden block and announced, “Cases closed.”

With that a loud din of voices exhaled and chattered. As we walked out, one of the female protestors came up to Mimi. “Are you coming to the rally Saturday?”

Mimi replied, “Sure thing.”

She looked at me as if to ask was I going too but I had not reached that decision yet and looked away.

We didn’t talk much until we got to my car. I retrieved my Snaps from the box.

As my car drove itself back to her home, Mimi said, “Frickin’ judge. I’ll bet she’s a member of Humans Only.”

The Humans Only organization preached bigotry in the highest. Guy Coocher headed their organization and was an elected Member of Parliament. He never missed an opportunity to press their cause. HO tried several times to get laws passed to forbid robots or hybrids from coming to our planet. Hybrids being those who had parts of their bodies replaced by mechanical or robotic parts. Or those who had “alien” DNA, such as the Bingers.

My personal beef with them came from my being a Binger.

Mimi asked, “You’re an investigator. What do you know about them?”

Was she asking about Bingers? Did she suspect I was one?

I hadn’t told her yet.

“Who?”

She exhaled with a puff of air. “The Humans Only people, who else?”

“Well, Guy Coocher is head of the group,” I said. “Their basic premise is hatred. Hatred for anybody unlike them. They hate robots. They hate hybrid humans. They hate Bingers.”

“And they're behind the slavers,” she added.

My car parked itself in her garage. She turned to me.

“I meant what I said about your making up your mind. You either support me or we're...”

“Give me some time to think about it,” I replied.

“Take your time,” she said as she exited my car and slammed the door. The message was clear. No more love making until I supported her.

I sat thinking in my car while she went inside.

“Car, my apartment.”

Chapter 6

On the way, I checked my calendar. With my most recent PI client case behind me and paid, and with Mimi's trial, and her ultimatum, I had little left to work on. One third priority task still remained however. To check on the validity of the history channel's programs for the war with Durr and the Bingers.

Most kids used the Net these days to do research on assigned subjects. The only classes that used attendance were art classes (music, sculpture, painting, and crafts) and some science classes. My spy boss back on Earth wanted me to make sure the kids on Rossa were getting the truth about the war and the Bingers. One of our biggest goals as agents of the Binger Intelligence Service, or BIS for short, was to fight prejudice against the Bingers. Making sure the kids got the truth was a critical part.

"Car, telly on. History channel. Play back the history of the war with Durr and the Bingers."

I watched the telly as my car made its way home.

"Sixty years ago, when humanity reached out for the stars, a Chinese spaceship encountered a mercon ship. Fighting broke out and the Chinese barely managed to escape and return to Earth.

"As has happened so many times in the past, whenever a group of humans encounters another group, hostilities soon followed."

"Like with the American Indians," suggested one student in the audience.

"Yes," replied the professor. "Only this time, the mercons put up a fight."

He continued, "Alarmed by the encounter with another species twenty-five light years away, the nations on Earth formed a united government, called the United Earth Federation, and prepared for war against a common enemy.

"The mercons used their higher intelligence in the design of weapons and strategies, but humanity had a far higher population with which to make more weapons. The war lasted eight years with many fatalities on both sides."

I had seen many of the battles before and skipped over replays of military encounters and campaigns.

"... before both sides ended the violence, declared a stalemate, and signed the Alcott-Gortush Treaty."

So far, the history channel got most of the facts right.

"Later, we learned the volatile nature of mercon politics had led to a violent civil war and resulted in a nuclear holocaust, rendering the planet of Durr uninhabitable. The mercons sought living space on Rossa.

“In exchange for some of their high technology, the sixty thousand remaining mercons migrated to Rossa to the eastern part of the southern island continent of Braco.

“Soon thereafter, the United Earth Federation degenerated into squabbling nations again and the mercons on Braco became silent.”

The educator said, “During the war with the mercons, Dr. Bing got samples of their DNA. He changed twenty-six different single-nucleotide polymorphism, or SNP, sections of human DNA in attempts to create enhanced-intelligence humans. His goal was to enable humanity to become smarter and have greater body strength in case of another war with Durr.

“He used viruses to inject snippets of SNP into human eggs. The resultant babies were called Bingers.”

“Where they smarter and stronger?” one student in the audience asked.

The professor nodded. “Noticeably.”

“So his experiments worked.”

“Seemed to.”

“So why are we taught to distrust Bingers?” asked another student.

“Because many humans who are not Bingers believed that the mercon DNA would make the Bingers loyal to the mercons, more than to humanity.”

“That's silly,” one student commented. “It's like the fear of Asian-Americans in California.”

“I agree. It's the old argument of nature versus nurture. The nurture theory says the upbringing of a child has far more influence on his loyalties than his DNA.

“Fortunately for those who lived on Rossa, our planet was equidistant from both Earth and Durr, so the smaller number of humans living here at the time were too far away to experience the war first hand.”

“My dad said he built missiles during the war,” one student added.

“Were you in the Space Force too?” asked a girl with blonde hair.

“Oh no,” replied the professor. “Never been in the military.”

“What did you do then?” asked the same little girl.

“I was just starting out as a professor.”

“Why didn't you go into the military like most men?”

“We're getting off the subject of today's lesson,” he said and continued.

“The use of computers and robots on Earth grew so much during the war that many humans became unemployed. That was one reason so many left Earth to come to

Rossa even if it meant becoming an indentured worker. At least here they felt welcome.”

The view changed for a commercial break.

During a close-up of workers smiling and working in agricultural fields, they all appeared to be singing the same song, “Close to Nature,” that I had heard many times. Mimi had told me the Zoon Owners Association and Humans Only paid for the commercials.

“Car, mute the commercial.”

The singing stopped but I could see the workers lips moving in synch. When the ad ended, the sound came back on again.

The lecturer continued. “Many desperately wanted to get off the home planet. Immigrants to Rossa via indentured contracts found they became indebted for five or more years.

“The large zoon owners and businesses on Rossa soon learned to take advantage of the indentured workers. By overcharging them for their food and lodging, many such workers found their date for paying off their debts extended far into the future. Some rebelled, only to be punished by their contract owners.

“That’s when the protests began.

“The two groups, pro-humans and anti-slavery, soon clashed. Pro-human groups feared being replaced by robots. Anti-slavery groups feared the restrictions of slavery and also feared death. By getting robotic body parts, humans could live much longer.

“It comes down to one of two fears. Dying or being replaced by robots. Younger folks tend to act as if they will live forever. They think only older people fear death. Those under thirty proclaimed they would never get old. Younger people also resisted slavery. Their hearts went out to the poor folks trapped in slavery.”

So far, the history lecture seemed spot on. But I thought of the future. We need the workers here and we need the technology that Earth can provide. But we don't have to have slavery.

Maybe Mimi was right. However, I could see the futility of fighting the entrenched special interests. We need the goods that the zoons provided even if slave labor was behind it.

Damn! There are no simple answers here.

[Thus ends the first six chapters of “Freedom.”]

If you liked this story, how about hopping over to Amazon.com or Goodreads.com and write a short review of it with your comments? If you want me to write more of these adventures of Jake Dani, please reward me with your review. It takes only a minute and I'd appreciate it very much.

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