

The Fine Print

By

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The pens stank of shit and vomit, sweat and blood. Joel curled his lip in disgust, more at himself than his companions. He couldn't recall the last time he'd been clean, or even just dirty. Grime and filth filled his pores, clogged his nostrils. And he'd thought homeless shelters stank. He'd been so full of himself—now he knew better. His lips twisted into a snarl of self-derision.

He reached into his waistband and scratched his crotch. Lice infested every square inch of his body. The guy lying prostrate beside him gave a sudden yell and jerked up, flailing at the air. Joel cuffed him on the side of the head and Kadith woke up, his hands curling into fists. Seeing Joel, the Rodite grimaced and lay back down.

Guy. Like he didn't have scaly rust colored skin with holes in the side of his head to serve as ears and round, taloned feet the size of dinner plates thickly padded to protect him from the sharp digs of the rocky ground. Looked like some monster out of a bad B movie.

Outside Joel could hear the sounds of marching feet in the yard and the jingle of wagons and harnesses. He sighed and then let out an animal whine as the crusted-over wound in his side cracked open and began to seep again. He pressed his palm to his ribs. There was no doubt that it was festering. How could it not in this hole? Kadith had fared better this round than he.

He fingered the sharp edges of the stump end of his sword. The blade was gone, which in the end didn't matter much. He hadn't had the means to sharpen the damned thing since he'd stepped through the portal and lost his pack to thieves. The jagged edges of this stump made a better weapon than the club his sword had long since become.

There was a rattle at the gates of the pen and the screech of hinges. The guards plodded in. They were Gagrells. Ugly sons-of-bitches, fast and tenacious. They had a purplish skin that was more like a warty hide, with gouges of black bristles growing from just above their eyes back down over their spines to the curve of their buttocks. Like most Gagrells, these two stood about six feet tall with enormous hunched backs and short powerful arms. If they could have stood straight up they probably would have been taller than any player in the NBA. Their hands were the size of hubcaps with eight fingers and no thumbs. That didn't seem to hinder them much though. They moved in an odd scraping lope, even when they were attempting to walk. They didn't have necks and had to pivot at the waist to look from side to side. But they were damned smart. A lot smarter than they looked. And mean.

These two were looking for someone in particular. They carried torches and swung them down into the faces of each of the slaves as they made their way through the pen. One guy's hair caught fire and he rolled around on the ground screaming until the flames went out. No one helped him.

The big ugly guards came to a halt when they got to Joel and Kadith. Joel didn't bother to get up and though he knew from the way his friend's breathing grew shallower that Kadith was aware of the Gagrells, he continued to lay as though asleep.

"You, get up."

Joel understood well enough what it was saying. He hadn't become particularly fluent in the language of this brutal world, but Kadith had helped him to learn enough to get by during the

past six months' sojourn together in the pens. But with the flesh of his ribs open to the bone and putrefying with every passing moment, he wasn't feeling particularly interested in accommodating these two bastards. So he just continued to lounge there against the wall with his legs crossed at the ankles, trying to look as cocky as Bill Gates watching his profits go up.

The second Gagrell looked as outraged as it could with its fleshy jowls pressing up over wide jaws to drown its lips. It slipped a coiled whip off its shoulder. The end consisted of a foot-long tassel of braided dugu hide which flashed with bits of sharp-edged metal.

Joel didn't bother to resist the urge to roll his eyes. The Gagrells couldn't touch him and they knew it. Not today. Not for another week. This one appeared to have conveniently forgotten that rule of the Game. But the first one hadn't. It slapped at the other with a forearm wrapped in a metal-studded gauntlet, knocking the whip from its hands so it had to bend and retrieve it from the filth.

"Come now," the first one said again.

This time it stretched out one of those oversized mitts. Joel knew it was going to "help" him up and out if he didn't go by himself. He rolled onto his side and then crawled to his feet, chewing the inside of his cheeks to keep from groaning out loud at the pain flaring in his side. Kadith opened his eyes, but said nothing. They were partners and maybe even something like friends, but more because of the necessity of the Game than anything else. If this was goodbye, then so be it.

Joel lifted one shoulder at him and then left the pens, sandwiched in between the two hulking Gagrells. He hoped he'd see Kadith again—they had made good partners in the ring—but he'd learned not to count on much more stability in this world than he had in his last.

The sun glared through the cold morning and Joel covered his eyes, wishing, not for the first time, for a pair of sun glasses, even cheap ones. But such things didn't exist in this world.

He'd almost welcome the sight of Uzon's predatory grin and inevitable demands for fatal payment, if only for a pair of sunglasses and some cheese fries from Stucky's.

Uzon.

He remembered the name and the praying mantis shaped face as though it were etched on the inside of his eyelids, in spite of the fact that he'd only ever seen the alien once, more than three years ago. Well and he'd asked for it, Joel chided himself, not for the first time. Too damned cocky and stupid for his own good. He'd gone looking for trouble and a way into another world, and had found both. Unfortunately he apparently hadn't been terribly picky about the kind of world he'd be given, not even enough to ask any questions. And what a gem of a place he'd ended up in. Oh, he'd a place to use the sword he'd swiped, just as Uzon had promised. But as a slave in the kind of Games that the Roman gladiators never even dreamed of playing. So much for all that daydreaming about being warlord or wizard or all the other crap in those stupid coverless books he'd fished out the dumpster behind the bookstores. The only thing they'd got right was how to find a gate to another world.

And a hell of a world it turned out to be too. Be careful what you wish for and all that crap. Christ! He had to stop cranking his balls over his own stupidity. Concentrate on the here and now. Besides, sooner or later Uzon would show up looking for a quick fix for his belly and Joel had some ideas about snagging that gate-making machine of his when he did. Provided of course that he stayed alive that long. And without a dose of antibiotics he didn't know how much longer that would be.

‘When what to his wondering eyes should appear’

Involuntarily the words rattled through his brain, even as he stumbled to an uncertain halt. There in the middle of the courtyard, his lips smiling that upside-down triangular grin, was Uzon.

Santa Claus with sharp, pointy teeth and an appetite. He stood with the Commanlear of the city, Dakar, the head-herdsman close by.

As the Gagrells urged Joel forward with painful jabs to his back, Uzon turned and gave him a slow once-over, the green-faceted eyes glittering anticipation. But not of a good meal. Joel waited for disappointment to sweep over the alien's face at his undoubtedly unappetizing appearance, but the other merely grinned again and waved him forward. The Gagrells gave him one last shove to bring him stumbling into the sphere of the Commanlear, Dakar and Uzon.

"This is the one?" The Commanlear asked.

"Indeed. I will take him now," he declared, everything about him and the Commanlear indicating that Uzon bore no fear of these men nor their beastie servants. On the contrary, the Commanlear's face revealed a wariness bordering of fear.

"I'm afraid this week it must be with his consent," countered Dakar's gravelly voice. His smooth gray skin and WWF body type gave Dakar the appearance of an embarrassed ghost—too big to just fade into the background as a proper ghost should, and as it looked like he dearly wanted to do. The wide sprung lizard eyes of his Freklen descent only added to the impression. Still, Joel had known better than to challenge or insult the head-herdsman. He'd seen the sadistic evidence of such encounters on many corpses and didn't choose to go down that road. He'd rather take on Uzon.

Or maybe not.

At Dakar's words, the praying-manis alien began to look angry and his body seemed to coil into pure threat. Dakar looked submissively away, touching his huge paw to his forehead and bowing. The sight brought a wide grin to Joel's face. That was one item ticked off on his 'die happy' list.

“He’s won the Game this week and so is Untouchable. He must give consent,” Dakar mumbled at the ground by way of explanation.

Hmmm. Stay here with certain grisly death, or go with Uzon for the same. Still, Joel knew he had a better possibility for escape from the alien than from the Freklen fighting pens. Joel considered waiting to see how Uzon would respond to Dakar, but decided that his knees might buckle before that happened and he didn’t care to be face down in the dirt at Uzon’s feet.

“I’m in,” he said instead.

The alien favored him with another of those grins, like he got a joke that Joel didn’t. Only this time he did get it.

But it was the better of two evils and with luck, he’d get Uzon alone and steal his little travel device and get back home to a clinic and some decent food and clothes. And a shower. A hot shower. The only way he was going to get out the Games was dead, and even then they’d probably make a meal out of him for the players or the animals. Call it recycling. With the gash across his ribs growing more putrid with every breath, that eventuality wouldn’t be a real long time off.

No real choice in the end.

“Let’s go.”

“Indeed. I will note your cooperation to the Gapote Kespetsi, Commanlear. I am certain he will be appreciative.”

If his words were meant to be approbation, the Commanlear didn’t take them as such. His charcoal skin blanched to a pasty gray. Joel got the feeling that whoever this Gapote Kespetsi was, no one wanted to be noticed by him, not even for commendation.

They departed the compound like walking out of a mall—no muss no fuss. Joel resisted the urge to keep looking over his shoulder for pursuit. When it got right down to it, he wasn't all that interested anyway.

He lagged after Uzon, the praying-mantis alien taking long galloping strides. Joel didn't even bother to try to keep up. Even undamaged he'd have had a hard time managing the pace, and with the gash across his ribs and minimal food rations, well he wasn't in any shape for an eco-challenge. So he said when the alien turned to impatiently confront him.

"We are on a tight schedule," Uzon insisted when after about a quarter of an hour Joel dropped down on a snag to rest.

"You may be. I'm not."

Uzon's response was to hook Joel up under the arm and haul him upright, easy as picking up a baby. When he let go, Joel swayed and then collapsed to the ground, gagging on the pain ripping through him. When the alien would have grabbed him again, Joel let the self-preservation instincts he'd developed in the pens take over and rolled away, stopping in a crouch, one hand pressed to the agonizing lava flow in his side.

"Do that again and I'll chew your balls off myself," he whispered.

Uzon paused—not particularly worried since he didn't share the human sort of genital apparatus that his prey obviously referred to—but the expression on the human's face caught his attention. It reminded him of something he occasionally saw on his employer's face, a look which he'd always interpreted as insane rage. Such a 'mood,' could only be assuaged with the shedding of a great deal of blood—it didn't really matter whose. He never trifled with the Gapote Kespeti in such situations.

After a moment, he decided neither would he test this human. It wouldn't do to kill him before the assignment could be completed. Not given the mood in which he'd left his master.

No, it would be more than an inconvenience to kill the human. It might mean becoming the object of his employer's attention.

Still, time was of the essence

"You are in a hurry actually. Either to come with me, or to die."

Joel flopped over on his back, squeezing his eyes shut against the pain. "Okay, I pick die."

Silence.

After a few moments he opened his eyes. Uzon looked strangely disconcerted—for a praying mantis alien creature. Finally he knelt down beside Joel.

"Rather an odd choice, given your haste in leaving the pens and this world."

"Yeah, well, I'm the kinda guy who lives in the moment. And in that moment I wanted out. And in this one I'm about halfway to dying anyhow and why not get it over with? It can't be a lot worse than how I feel right now."

Now Uzon was beginning to figure it out because his nose—what passed for a nose—started twitching and then next thing Joel knew the alien pulled up his shirt and was gazing in strange fascination at the wound on his ribs. The flesh around it had swelled purple and green. Red strings ran beneath his skin like the arms of radioactive jellyfish. Bloody puss leached from the blackened edges of the wound and oozed down his side. The sight of it was enough to make Joel want to vomit.

Whatever comment Joel was going to make about tenderizing the meat before eating, or what a yummy scooby snack he was going to make—all that was lost when Uzon's pointed, prehensile tongue came squirting out of his mouth and he began licking at the wound like a hungry kid on a sucker.

Now Joel did vomit, heaved until he couldn't hardly breathe, until he began to lose consciousness. Still that slurping tongue continued to lap at him, opening the wound, probing into his flesh, following the knife's original trail down to his ribs.

When he woke up again, the pain in his side was gone, and the first of the world's two suns had sunk below the horizon. He rolled to his feet, staggering a few steps.,

"You are filthy," said Uzon as he too stood. "It is time to go."

"What did you do?" Joel's voice sounded faint in the lowering dusk as he lifted his shirt. Bruised he still was, and swollen. But the red streaks and puss were gone, and the edges of the gash folded together pinkly.

"It's a valuable asset of my body chemistry," Uzon replied, fishing in the pack beneath his voluminous cloak, pulling out the travelling machine. "My people can neutralize poisons, close horrendous wounds—yours was mere infection and easily taken care of. So now to business, if you are now feeling up to it? I've no doubt you wish to return to your home world by now. Though let me be clear," he laid a clawlike hand on Joel's shoulder, the alien's fingers digging painfully into his flesh until Joel thought they might pop through his skin altogether. "You've a debt to repay me, and I require your assistance. Once you do as I need, you will have your freedom. If you do not, I'll gut you and eat your heart. And trust me, you'll still be alive for my first bite."

Hard to beat that deal. Literally. And Joel did feel better, though the image of Uzon lapping at his flesh like a cat on a bowl of Tuna wasn't going to leave his mind any time soon. Whether or not the alien was telling him the truth about letting him go, well he wouldn't hold his breath. But back in earth world, he stood a decent chance at escape.

Besides, he did owe a debt, though what a poor exchange he'd made of it, not looking into the fine print when Uzon had so graciously agreed to send his gullible self into another world

where he could attain magic and adventure. He thought back to the moment and grimaced. What kind of idiot trusted an alien who had just killed a mob courier and was chewing on his finger like it was chocolate?

Joel shook his head. Didn't matter. Whatever else he'd learned or lost in the past three years, he'd come to understand that the only thing that was his to give or keep was his word, and breaking it made it and him worthless. So he was going to pay his debt to Uzon.

The rectangular gateway of yellow light appeared then firmed, the buzzing of the machine seeming extraordinarily loud in the twilight silence. Uzon gripped Joel by the back of the neck and pitched him through and then followed on his heels.

They came through in a dingy, deserted warehouse, its empty vastness echoing even the slightest sound. Beyond the walls with their high checkerboard windows, Joel could hear the sounds of traffic and voices, the drone of an airplane and something else he couldn't place.

"Where are we?"

"L.A. Near the docks."

That would account for the other noise he heard—waves. The ocean. He'd always wanted to see it.

"Is there food?"

That raised a mocking smile, but it had been a long day and Joel had missed two feedings. Whatever Uzon wanted him to do, it could wait until he made a couple of runs through the Burger King menu.

Four hours later found them in a Motel Six on the outskirts of Malibu, the floor littered with pizza boxes, Taco Bell and Burger King wrappers and a half dozen empty Mountain Dew cans. Joel groaned luxuriously from where he lay draped across one of the beds.

"I missed beds. And real food. And TV. And normal clothes."

Uzon had scavenged him a pair of jeans, an orange T-shirt with a Corona logo on it, and best of all, a pair of Nikes. Joel didn't even care if the guy's body was still warm when Uzon brought him the clothes and he put them on. There wasn't any blood on them, nor lice or fleas. That had been Uzon's first order of business at the warehouse.

He had dragged Joel over to the emergency hazmat shower station leftover from when the warehouse had been in use, forced him to strip naked, poured a foul-smelling, skin-eating can of pest remover over him, and then scrubbed him down. But Joel had left the warehouse clean for the first time since—he couldn't even remember since when. Certainly the taxi driver had given him a double take, wrapped up in a blanket with bare feet and wet hair, but Uzon waved a few bills in the man's face and that was all Habib knew.

Joel drifted off on the bed listening to canned laughter on the TV for some sitcom. He hadn't been asleep nearly long enough when Uzon shook him awake.

"Time."

Joel yawned and sat up, scratching fleabites on his thigh.

"For what?"

"You to get to work."

"Now? It's almost midnight."

"Then we have to hurry. She will expect you soon."

"She who?"

The answer wasn't forthcoming and Uzon merely opened the door and waited. Joel shook his head to clear it and then launched himself off the bed. The sooner the better he could get rid of the alien. Or better yet, nab that travelling box.

Odd as it might sound, Joel wasn't all that excited to be back in the US. The noise, the stench, the smothering crowds of people, all could be dealt with. But there wasn't anything for

him here. He wasn't going to be the guy who won the Lottery or invented a fantabulous new mouse trap, or whatever. At least in the Pens he had been the best.

Uzon directed the cab into downtown Malibu and then sat back, long white fingers tapping together. It was about this time that Joel noticed for the first time that Uzon had two more extra knuckles in his hands than human—including the thumb—and that he was nervous. This of course made Joel nervous. Uzon wasn't the type to come unglued, so whatever they were up to, it was big.

But the alien wasn't answering any of the questions Joel pitched at him.

Finally they pulled up and got out. The street was packed with summer tourists, bright lights and music spewing from any number of hot spots. The smell of roasting meat teased Joel's nose, but Uzon turned him up the street and walked him down the block. The building they stopped in front of was three stories and made of Spanish tile trimmed with pink brick.

A sign over the entrance read: Allegra Clegg, Psychic to the Stars, with a neon pink arrow pointing to the glassed over entranceway.

"This is where we are going? Are you kidding?" Joel turned to Uzon who was pulling on his goatee. "You aren't kidding. Maybe you wanna tell me the rest now?"

Uzon nodded and jerked his head for Joel to accompany him. He strolled down the street and around the corner, sidestepping into the shadowy recessed doorway of a hair salon. Uzon didn't begin talking right away and Joel had the curious feeling that the alien was feeling a bit uncomfortable with the whole matter. Finally he gave a very human sigh and jumped in.

"As you may have surmised, I work for a personage titled the Gapote Kespeti, who is a wealthy notable in his world, and for whom I procure goods and information. He can be quite generous, though sometimes he becomes . . . moody."

The way he said it, Joel had the feeling that this Gapote Kesperti got moody the way mother nature gets moody and sends earthquakes, hurricanes, fires and famine to relieve her pms.

“Recently the Gapote Kesperti has been feeling . . . spied upon, in an otherworldly fashion. As though someone were peeking into his mind. Some might call it paranoia, and some might be right. Some would never tell him so to his face and live.

“But he came to me with instructions to come here and retrieve one Allegra Clegg, Psychic to the Stars. How he arrived at that name, I know not, unless she is truly a powerful psychic and has indeed been trespassing across worlds into his mind. The Gapote Kesperti is not patient, and my deadline is swiftly approaching.”

“So, if I understand correctly, you want me to help you kidnap this woman, and then you’ll bop on back to your employer’s house where he’ll do what to her?”

Uzon shrugged and blinked. Not so much like he didn’t know, but why did it matter?

“I assume he’ll eat her brain and organs and that will be that,” Uzon answered.

“There’s a fixed operating procedure for this sort of contingency?”

“For taking care of one’s enemies, yes.”

“Oh. Sure. Raw I suppose?”

“Sometimes, though it is not unheard of to roast the organs and spice them up a bit.”

“Of course not. So what’s my part in this show?”

Uzon smiled that pointed smile, the one broken off in the front making him appear more like a ghoul than not.

“Miss Clegg has been quite successful and as a result of her popularity, has been faced with any number of threats and attacks. Her security is quite formidable. I could not cross it. And even if I could, and if she has the abilities which my employer believes, she will know me instantly for what I am and what I intend. However, I have given you a false identity and made

you a private appointment as this night's first client. You are eccentric and unreasonably wealthy, as well as paranoid and spoiled."

He glanced up and down Joel's lanky frame. "Your clothes quite suit the persona. The fact that you have lived three years in another world will confuse her psychic senses and give credence to your identity. You will lure her outside, and then I will take her from there."

"And we never meet again."

"Exactly."

"Then let's get going. Don't want to be late for my first date back from hell."

This time Joel led the way back to Allegra Clegg's storefront. Uzon faded into the brightly lit darkness on the other side of the street.

Four goons at the door were dressed in white suits and purple bowties with slicked back hair and perfect teeth. Joel hated them on sight and thought what a wonderful meal Uzon could make of them. If he could get around all the plastic and silicon.

They believed him when he identified himself and let him on to the elevator which would take him to the third floor where Allegra Clegg conducted business.

When the elevator opened, there was another squad of white dressed goons and an assorted mix of electronic surveillance equipment and weaponry. Joel didn't let it get to him. In fact it all hardly seemed real. He hadn't been all that afraid of death or pain for awhile now, so none of the threat these men were trying to embody worked on him.

Apparently that suited his persona too.

He was let into a small room tossed about with hundreds of purple and white cushions of every size and shape. They constituted the furniture, aside from racks and racks of candlesticks, all of which held purple and white candles and all of which were burning brightly. The walls and ceiling were likewise swathed in purple and white satin.

Allegra Clegg sat ensconced in a nest of pillows near the middle of the room. She wasn't quite what he expected. Course he couldn't really say what he'd expected, but a middle-aged, fat hispanic woman with frosted hair, impossibly long fingernails, and purple pouty lips, wrapped up in a gauze robe colored—you guessed it, purple and white—somehow didn't fit the bill.

“Dear Edward, I may call you Edward? Welcome. There is wine, if you will and please, come sit next to me.” She had the voice of a 1-900 Sex chick and Joel let it roll around over his body like a physical caress. She had to have known what her voice was capable of because she just let him stand there enjoying the moment, waiting for him to return to his senses.

It was a long moment.

But he had Uzon's plan to fulfill, and a new one of his own birthing and he didn't have time to waste.

Ignoring her invitation, Joel began a catlike exploration of the room, his every movement calculated to convey distrust and discomfort. Finally he came to a stop in front of the doorway and facing Allegra Clegg.

“I must apologize for wasting your time Miss Clegg. I find that I cannot be in this building.”]

He gave a pointed shudder and then glanced sharply around the room as if someone were listening to his every word.

“Perhaps you would be willing to come outside to speak with me?”

Now he lent his voice a faint tone of pleading. She fell for it. Or his money. The money she thought he had.

She lumbered to her feet and sashayed across the floor to hook arms with him, rubbing herself against him. Now he noticed her unbelievably bad breath and her lazy eye. Still he

hadn't been near a woman in three years and she was having a disturbing effect on him. Now he knew how long he'd been in the Freklen pens.

The upstairs bodyguards wanted to accompany them, but Allegra dismissed them with reminders of the ones downstairs. In the elevator, Joel nibbled on her ear and jaw and told her how much he wanted to be alone with her, which wasn't altogether a lie, and so the downstairs bodyguards were told firmly to stay put while they strolled down the block to the seaside park where they could be alone.

As they walked, Allegra continued to cling to Joel's arm and he continued to be disturbed by her proximity. Which left him totally off guard when they stopped for traffic at the corner and she turned to him and said,

"What is your real name? I can almost . . . Jonathon? No . . . Josh? . . ."

He couldn't help himself. He was too stupefied.

"Joel."

"Ah yes." She ran a hand up his arm to his cheek. "And you have been away, but I don't recognize the place . . ." Joel shrugged out of her grip and stood stiffly facing her. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to intrude, but there's something . . ."

She didn't get to finish because Uzon stepped out of the shadows of the building and took her arm and pulled her out into the crosswalk. Joel followed, trying to collect himself.

Strangely, Allegra Clegg did not seem particularly bothered by the alien's sudden arrival, and if she could read Joel, then she could read Uzon. They walked into the park, stopping at a picnic table screened around by dogwood trees and jacarandas.

"You're taking me to him, aren't you? I knew he was sending someone. He's angry with me. I was afraid for awhile, but one can't run from one's karma."

Uzon's description of what the Gapote Kespeti would do to her flashed through Joel's mind and he suppressed it, wondering if she could read his thoughts from a distance. But apparently not, or she wasn't paying much attention to him because she remained calm, waiting for Uzon to open the gate.

The rectangle of yellow light appeared and firmed. Uzon beckoned to Allegra Clegg and gave her a little push through.

Just as he did, she turned and gave an amused look at Joel and he knew that she had indeed read his thoughts—and why shouldn't she know what plans the Gapote Kespeti had in store for her? She could rifle through his thoughts.

Joel nodded to her.

There was more there than met the eye. And then she was gone.

Uzon turned to Joel and gave a mocking bow.

"Thank you for your assistance. It is time for me to say farewell."

"About that," Joel said, stepping closer. "I've been thinking and it's pretty clear that you still owe me. I asked for a world of magic, and you didn't deliver. I did, however, do my part in obtaining Allegra Clegg for you."

This was not what Uzon had expected to hear. He blinked, his faceted green eyes glittering in the streetlights. Then he grinned and crossed his arms.

"What do you suggest I should do about it?"

"I think that I don't trust you much to put me somewhere I might want to be, so I think I'd better accompany you until I find something suitable."

"Accompany me?"

"On your procuring travels."

"HmHm. And you would help me, I suppose?"

“I suppose. If you needed a hand. Otherwise I could use a vacation. Course you’d have to pay me. Who knows? Maybe I’ll like your world so much I’ll decide to stay.”

Joel wasn’t sure but he thought the sound that Uzon made then was a snort of laughter. Hard to imagine that he was capable of that kind of sound. But the idea made him feel better about the alien.

“Well, you did survive the Pens for three years. You have proven that much resourcefulness”

“Besides, I don’t think your Gapote Kespeti is going to find it so easy to chow down on Allegra Clegg. I’d like to be there for the introductions.”

“Indeed? I must say that having met her, I agree. Which shall be happening without us soon if we don’t cease loitering in your world. Shall we?” Uzon gestured at the gateway and Joel stepped toward it then stopped and turned back to his companion.

“One condition. If I ever catch you looking at me like I’m a pop tart—and I don’t care if we’re marooned on some desert island without food or water for the rest of our very short lives—I’ll have to do something about it. And, as empty a threat as that might have been three years ago when we first met? Trust me on this one, don’t take me lightly. I’ve learned a thing or two about hurting someone since then.”

Then Joel stepped through and vanished.

Uzon’s grin flashed and he chuckled, a braying, grinding sound.

“Indeed not, my friend. Not lightly at all.”

And then he too went through, thinking already of the largesse of Gapote Kespeti’s appreciation and how best to make use of his new partner.