Slaves

by STEVE BENTON

Two unexpected worlds collide in a tale of two beings who blend the lines between friend and foe.

Artwork by Dmitry Zaviyalov

Golden-eyed Kantros relaxed in the warm summer sun, a cool breeze keeping it from being unbearably hot outside. She enjoyed the fair seasons on her world; a place made for her and those of her kind.

However, it was also made for those of the lumbering caste: the large, bumbling

antagonists that almost always seemed to be underfoot, sticking their noses in everyone else's business and making a racket at the most inconvenient of times.

Kantros was of the stealth caste. As luck would have it (or not), she was required to share property with one of the lumbering caste (who referred to themselves as the warrior caste) – a brown-eyed, unkempt male named Vortag.

As they shared their property, they also had the same group of slaves, per the rules of their society. There was a mature male, a female, and two juveniles, with one of each gender. Kantros rather liked having slaves, but easily became upset when they forgot her daily massage, or when her meals were prepared late. After all, slaves were there for her pleasure.

Vortag didn’t seem to mind their slaves' lack of punctuality, and this particular fact caused some strife between the two. Still, Kantros had to consider that she was a relative newcomer to her property.

At first, she believed she could put up with Vortag's antics and partying, but things came to a head rather quickly. The ensuing fights almost forced both to abandon their properties and slaves, which would have been devastating to both. But they managed to make amends and live in peace – for the time being.

Artwork by Sergey Kolesov

"Vortag, they are late with our meals again. How much longer shall you tolerate your slaves' ineptitudes?"

"Really, Kantros. You can be such a relaxed individual, but you stress out over the smallest of things. We have blessed lives. Our world doesn't require us to work, we have servants who attend to our every need, and yet you fret over schedules and massages. There are worse things that could happen."

"Perhaps you are correct. Still, I would prefer to have my own property and slave."

Vortag flopped down onto a large, plush pillow with a light grunt, stretching out and relaxing in the shade provided by a massive tree.

"I am rather fond of my servants, Kantros. I wish you could see the value they bring."

"Value, yes. But they are so... primitive! Their species cannot even communicate properly. They attempt to address us in grunts, whistles and hisses. It would be insulting, were it not so pathetic."

"Kantros, not all species are capable of telepathic communication. We are indeed fortunate, and highly advanced in comparison. Plus, we have been on this world much longer than the slave species. And although you and I are of differing castes, we have much more in common with each other than with those poor, unfortunate beasts. Even more so now that the war has ended. I am glad we have resolved our differences and can enjoy our blessed lives in peace."

"The war was costly, I must agree. Yet we still see fights break out between our castes. If only yours would groom a bit more, and stop making such a racket. You have to be the noisiest types I've ever seen – even noisier than the slaves and their annoying offspring."

Kantros sat up and looked out over the patio expectantly. She knew her lunch would soon be served, on a silver platter, as was to be expected. Kantros preferred the male slave when it came to prepared meals, but the female for her massages.

Vortag merely sighed and relaxed, lulling off into a light sleep. He knew he would be awakened when his meal arrived.

Artwork via Melvyn Grant

The male slave, a bumbling creature called Grar, stumbled across the lawn, carrying a silver platter, while screeching out the most horrid sounds in an attempt to let his mistress know he was dutifully bringing her lunch.

Vortag awoke from the sounds emitted from the slave's mouth ugly mouth portal, looking up slowly, and then flopping back down, uninterested, as the food was not for him. He found tastes of the stealth caste to be a bit strong, with his caste preferring heartier fare.

"Kantros, perhaps you can teach Grar to prepare something that stinks less? How can you eat those things? It smells like a dead slave."

"Oh, shut it, Vortag. You have no taste buds, and you know it," said Kantros, while her trusty slave set the platter before her and backed away, bowing while making a vain attempt at communicating with its owner.

"We of the warrior caste simply prefer food with body, Kantros. I believe you know that to be true."

"Lord, here comes the neighbor's slave. Now they won't shut up, and we'll have to tolerate their squawking for an hour at least."

"Can't you just relax? Kantros, our slaves work day and night, waiting on us and

providing our every need. Leave them be, and let them mingle with their own kind. It's not like they could very well have an intelligent conversation with us, is it?"

Kantros groaned and dug into her lunch, while Vortag watched Grar and the neighbor slave engage in a screeching conversation that sounded like machine parts grinding together.

"Look Kantros - it appears our slaves are engaging in some rudimentary game. Notice how they move their tentacles in a complex, almost ritualistic manner."

"Perhaps it has something to do with their pagan religion. Our scientists have determined that they do believe in some sort of deity."

"Well? Is that not an indicator of sapience? I truly believe there is more to this odd species than most would believe," said Vortag.

"Perhaps you are correct. Still, I would prefer to eat in peace and not have to hear their racket."

Vortag shook his head in disdain, and then got up and walked over to near where his slave and that of his neighbor were engaged in some form of base communication. He watched with interest as they waved their extremities in various directions, appearing to be a danger not only to others but also to themselves.

"Friend, do not approach while they are in their trance state, as you may be struck by them. It would be a shame to have to destroy a perfectly good slave," Kantros said, with just a touch of sarcasm.

"Perhaps you are correct," Vortag mentally sighed, as he returned to his comfortable pillow in the shade, "Though I would like to attempt advanced training again."

"Vortag, when will you realize? There is no training these beings to do anything more than menial tasks. They have no great intelligence, and are only good for massages and meals. They cannot even properly protect us from outside threats."

"But that is the purpose of my caste, my small friend. Protection is our nature. Oh, did I tell you how I saw what appeared to be a conflict between our male and female slaves?"

"No, you did not. What was the apparent issue at hand?"

"I heard some unusual noises, so I became curious and entered into the slaves'

sleeping area. I found Grar squelching at the female, Glap, who had removed her slave coverings and was in her sleeping flat with a female slave from a different property."

"How odd," said Kantros. "What do you think happened? Was it a territorial matter?"

"I had seen that particular slave on our land earlier, and the two females seem to enjoy giving each other massages. I believe the male wanted a massage but perhaps was denied by the females and became upset. If they could only talk..."

"Oh, I see. Well, who doesn't like a massage?" responded Kantros, as she finished her meal. The two then watched Grar bring a large serving for Vortag, setting it down before his owner, while garbling something odd from his hideous mouth hole.

Artwork by Mathias Zamecki

"Ah, they have improved the recipe for my meal. See? They do have some

intelligence," exclaimed Vortag, as he ignored his slave's noises and hungrily dug into his food. "Kantros, you have had more than one slave. Tell me how these compare to your previous servants."

"I was rather fond of my previous slave, but it was overtaxed, as there were many others of my caste present, and the land was too small. Still, it was a female, who worked alone, and had the most magnificent scent. It pained me to leave, but I needed to have more privacy, so I surrendered myself to the Box of Transition for property and slave reassignment."

"Was that the only other one you had?"

"No," said Kantros. "My first slave died of unknown causes. There was no battle, to speak of. It, a male, merely did not awake one day. I remember it used to sit in front of a mysterious panel of light, without its slave coverings, and would massage itself frequently. It was also very large and round, unlike the female, who was frail."

"How odd. To not die in battle is most dishonorable."

"Vortag, your ways are so strange. To escape is a badge of honor for my caste."

"Ah, but you do fight well, small one. I still bear the scar of your strike during the war."

Kantros reveled in the compliment, so she smiled, relaxed, and enjoyed the warm sunshine on her delicate, striped face.

The slave called Grar walked into his large sleeping quarters, shutting the entrance portal behind him as Kantros and Vortag heard him screech and cough at his mate, Glap.

"Becky, did the kids feed the pets earlier? They ate like they hadn't been fed in a week."

"They did, right before they went upstairs to do their homework. Or so they said... John, you know how kids can be."

"Hmm, I think we're going to have to have a talk with them. Anyway, did you notice how Blitz and Precious have been getting along so well lately? Who would have ever

thought a german shepherd and an old pound cat could become friends, especially

when they used to get into so many fights."

"Yeah, it's kinda weird. Almost like they're planning something," said Becky.

"As if!" laughed John.

Steve Benton

Based in Southern California, Steve is the author of The Prīmulī Prophecies series, which so far includes Lives of Future-Past, Lives of Lost Angels and Lives of the Provectus.