

Shakti

Copyright © 2018 by J.K. Ullrich

First Place, BSFS 2018 Amateur Writing Contest

Printed by permission of the author

"On the house, birthday girl," says the one-armed bartender, pouring a generous glass of emerald liquid and sliding it across the counter. "Ladies on those fancy inner-ring worlds may not appreciate their age, but out here on the rim, survival is something to celebrate."

I toast him and down the beverage in one gulp. The chlorophyll flavor of fermented algae tastes like drinking the planet Saraswati itself, a throatful of sunlight and brine.

"How many years have you stolen from the universe today?" he asks.

I smile at his choice of words. "Two hundred and eighty-seven."

Beer stops burbling mid-draught. "Is this some new biotech I haven't heard of?" The bartender narrows his eyes at me. "You don't look even look forty."

"Biologically, I'm not. But it sounds more impressive if I don't adjust for time dilation."

He sucks breath through his teeth. "You're the operator of that cargo freighter from ColonyCorp," he says with a mix of wonder and accusation. "I always thought they ran on pure AI."

"That's a myth. I'm as human as your grandparents. Who I probably carried here a century ago."

"Then you saw Saraswati before colonization!" He leans across the driftwood bar, lowering his voice. "What was it like?"

I gaze across the rickety deck. The first time I'd watched Saraswati's twin sunset, rays of molten light had painted shifting red mosaics on a pristine sea. Jeweled archipelagos shone above the swell. Now brutish industrial structures cover the islands, and floating causeways bob on the tide. I strain my eyes for the sleek marine creatures that once leapt from the waves, but nothing moves except the ponderous wakes of ferryboats carrying divers

home from the reefs. The ocean seems as empty as my glass.

"It was paradise," I murmur into the breeze. "What happened to the fish?"

The bartender shakes his head. "Hardly any left since ColonyCorp forced us to start harvesting that damned coral. All the natural reefs within a day's sailing have been chipped down to the seabed. And for what? So rich inner-ringers can flaunt coral jewelry and carvings?" He twiddles his remaining fingers in a foppish gesture.

"It's a lucrative export."

"We could sell plenty of other resources—salt, shellfish, algae products—but ColonyCorp only wants coral. By the time we pay off Saraswati, there won't be anything left of it. Or us. We have to dive the trenches to find enough coral now, and deep is dangerous." He shrugs the stump of his right shoulder. "Got trapped in a fissure. Having two arms is no use to a drowned man."

"Sounds like you need to abandon the coral industry."

"Then we can't pay back the indenture and ColonyCorp will repossess Saraswati," he says bitterly. "We'll end up like...what was the name of that planet? The first one colonized in the Tridevi System, ages ago."

"Shakti." The name echoes inside my glass.

"Right. Everyone's so afraid of that happening here, they won't act." He clenches a towel until it drips onto his bare feet. "They're as rooted as the damn coral."

"And a lot less valuable, in ColonyCorp's opinion," I mutter. "You need to assert yourselves, show them you won't take abuse."

"How?"

I turn towards the water again, letting the wind press my eyelids shut. "I'm bound for Lakshmi next with blasting material for the mines. A little bit

always evaporates in transit, so no one's too strict about invoicing. But it's powerful stuff—even a small amount would be enough to destroy a sizable target. Like, say, a dive boat."

The bartender toys with his beard. "Did ColonyCorp send you to suggest that and weed out dissenters?"

"Maybe I just like fireworks."

"Maybe you do. But before I can trust you, you'll have to trust me." Pulling an opaque jug from under the counter, he uncorks it, sniffs the stopper with a connoisseur's inscrutable expression, and pours a ruby shot. "This is the best liquor on Saraswati. We distill it from red algae—hell of a buzz, but if you don't store it properly, it turns so bad that a sip will kill you."

I hold the glass to the dying light, matching its hue to the sunset. "Which variety is this?"

"Drink it and see. Otherwise get back on your ship and forget we ever had this chat."

Without breaking our eyelock, I swallow the syrup. Unexpected sweetness slithers across my tongue. A rogue smile bursts across my new friend's face as I lick the spice from my lips.

"When do we get the boom?"

From the space elevator's dizzying vantage, I count the new scars on Lakshmi's cratered face. Straight, unnatural lines mar the jagged topography I've come to admire over the years. An old woman waits to greet me at the base station.

"You must be the new Matriarch," I say when we exchange ritual bows.

Her eyebrows shoot into her silver hair. "I was appointed shortly before your last visit."

"Of course," I apologize. My mind struggles to reconcile the figure from memory—a vigorous woman eager to liberate her constituents from the crushing demands of the loan ColonyCorp had granted them to establish the colony—with the crone before me, withered by the strain of eking life from a harsh planet.

"I'm sure all of us primitive rock-busters look the same after a few hundred years," says the Matriarch, her light cadence veiling a rebuke.

"Truly, I remember you. We discussed your new asteroid mining initiative, and I suggested prioritizing magnesium." I nod at the towers of waiting cargo crates. "I hear the shipyards can't get enough of it, now that new solar sail design is standard."

The muscles around her mouth twitch spasmodically in a grin. "We had a change of plan after the revolution on Saraswati."

"Revolution?" I arrange my face into a study of innocence.

"Some dissidents blew up a dive boat and sparked an insurrection against ColonyCorp. It's been carrying on for at least five years now. Coral exports have all but stopped, so precious metals have come back into vogue. Our ores are worth a fortune."

"How lucky! That'll help pay the indenture."

The Matriarch beams. "At this rate, Lakshmi will be ours in just two generations. We've converted all our magnesium mines to gold. It's our best chance to—" Words shatter into dry, fracturing coughs that bend her wizened frame in two. I grasp her elbow to keep her from losing balance.

"Gold mining can have toxic consequences, if it's not managed correctly," I tell her quietly.

"Visiting every decade or so doesn't qualify you to tell us how to live." She dabs her mouth with the back of her hand and wipes fingers on her jumpsuit, leaving smeared red constellations. "Quit staring and get to work, if you ever want to call this planet your own," she croaks as a group of youths hovering nearby. They begin unloading equipment crates from the elevator as the Matriarch leads me outside to a grime-encrusted transport. The vehicle jolts over rocky terrain, bare formations scrolling past the window.

"I've always enjoyed Lakshmi's stark beauty," I say, attempting civil conversation. "Last time I was here, I hiked up a mountain with tremendous crystal formations at the peak. When the sun came through, rainbows filled the entire valley."

"We excavated that mountain to the ground a few years ago," says the Matriarch. "It was packed with ore, and the crystals made good lenses for our industrial lasers."

"Oh." I turn back to the craters. Landscapes painted on my memory in a thousand shades of oxidized red have turned a dull, lifeless brown. They match the workers' faces, irrevocably carved with the strain of their industry.

"I know what it looks like," says the Matriarch after a few silent kilometers, clenching her jaw until its stubborn lines emerge as boldly as the quarry strips outside. "The asteroid mining was safer and cleaner, but ColonyCorp devalued magnesium and imposed quotas for gold. Market fluctuation, they said. We have to accept their terms if we hope to buy freedom."

"You're buying it with your lives."

"I know. My son and his wife died in a mine collapse last month." She grips the controls so tightly that her hands go pale, emphasizing the indigo tinge of her cyanotic fingertips. "My little granddaughter lost her parents. I can't let her lose her home, too."

"She won't if I can help it. Once we finish here, I'm due back on Vaikuntha for my end-of-route visit to headquarters. I'll talk to the Chairman about your situation." When the Matriarch shoots me a skeptical glance, I explain, "I'm one of only a few employees who ever sets foot on ColonyCorp's most distant assets. That—along with my many years of service to the company—gives my opinions some weight."

Her chuckle dissolves in another bout of coughing. "You're unusually empathetic for a freight operator. Most of them hardly talk if they can avoid it. But then, I imagine such an isolating job appeals to people who don't have any human connections."

"Or who've had more than they can bear." My confession fades in ghostly mist on the window.

News feeds from across the system project history on my skin, relative weeks of events reeling past for every hour I hang suspended in my ship's tiny media chamber. A sweep of my fingers unspools headlines from across the solar system, spinning a luminous web of causality:

Saraswati Rebels Seize Space Elevator, Halt Exports

Mining Boom Draws Hundreds of New Colonists to Lakshmi

ColonyCorp Reports Record Profits; Chairman Hints at Leasing Parvati

A chill trickles down my spine, staring at that last article. The ship's proximity alarm makes me start so hard that I invert in microgravity.

"It's all right, I'm coming." Shivering, I turn off the feed and propel myself to the cockpit. Parvati stares at me through the porthole like a backwards eye, a green pupil in the vast black iris of space. Still pristine, nothing more to ColonyCorp than a gravitational slingshot to hasten the return of its cargo freighters. Settling myself at the console, I calculate trajectories and tilt the sail. Numbers on the gauge creep higher as solar pressure hits the kilometer-wide polymer sheet, approaching a higher percentage of light speed. I steer a graceful arc around Parvati. Wisps of cloud swirl over its verdant continents. Ice caps spread white veins from the poles into the azure seas. The planet blurs and I scrub a cuff across my eyes.

"It's not the same world," I tell the silence. "It won't suffer the same fate." The words dissolve against the bulkhead as we hurtle back towards the Tridevi System's heart.

"I'm afraid that's out of the question," says the ColonyCorp Chairman, sipping his crimson digestif. "Half the habitable worlds have magnesium—it's never worth much—but the inner ring is clamoring for luxury goods. We must take advantage of demand or our revenue will slip even further."

I glare at him through the sparkling candelabras. Thank goodness I only have to tolerate this charade once every 20 years. "This doesn't look like the table of a poor man."

"Colonists aren't the only ones with debts. We have investors to satisfy. That's why I'll keep encouraging Lakshmi to produce precious ores, and why I'll tolerate Saraswati's tantrum." His smile reveals teeth stained red from the drink. "The increased coral prices from the shortage may ultimately be more profitable than the planet's best harvest."

"But they're insulting us," says his heir from the middle seat. It's the first time he's spoken all evening. The mewling infant from my last visit had ripened into a handsome young man with dark curls, full lips, and an annoying habit of toying with his silverware. "Let Saraswati go unpunished and every indentured world in the galaxy will spit in our faces."

"What would you advise?" I ask the boy. "Repossess the planet? Enslave its people and strip its natural resources until only a lifeless shell remains, like you did on Shakti?"

His slim brows knit in a frown. "What's Shakti?"

"Ancient history," says the Chairman. "The first planet we sponsored in the Tridevi System proved...troublesome. My great-grandfather managed it poorly."

The Heir scowls at his lacquered plate. "You mean he didn't let dirt-farming colonists intimidate him."

"He had more pride than business sense, and it almost ruined us. Repossessing planets is a costly practice, one I prefer to avoid." The Chairman shoots his son a contemptuous look. "These petty insurrections always burn out. Remote worlds rely on our trade network—a few years without imports and they'll beg to wear the yoke again."

"Nothing like a failed rebellion to break spirits," I mutter.

The Chairman's reptilian gaze returns to me. "I invite my freight operators here for insight, not criticism. If you disagree with my policies, you're welcome to retire. Interest on your salary must have compounded handsomely over the past few centuries. Buy a moon, settle down."

"A charming prospect. Are you selling any of your vacant planets? Parvati, perhaps?"

"Certainly not. That little world is going to pull ColonyCorp back into profitability. I'm meeting with our investors next week to plan initial colonization."

I clench my spoon so hard that the metal wilts in my palm. Hiding it under a napkin, I arrange the exquisitely carved coral cruets into a model of the Tridevi System. "Saraswati, Lakshmi, and now Parvati. Then what?"

"There are countless other systems, with countless other planets," says the Chairman.

"And countless expendable wretches to sell their children's labor for the fantasy of a better future." Each syllable leaves a splinter in my mouth.

The Chairman drains his cocktail. "Your centuries observing the universe have not been in vain. Clearly you grasp its natural order." He drops his white napkin to the table, the dinner's flag of surrender, and leaves the hall without another word.

Seething behind my mask of serenity, I bow to the Heir. "Thank you for your hospitality. I should return to my ship."

He stands so quickly that he almost upends his ornate chair. "Please don't leave so soon. Father may only care about commerce, but I'd love to hear your stories from the outer ring."

Manicured hands twitch at his sides, lost without a fork to twirl. Like every other fixture in the room, he's lovely and impractical. An indulgence.

I glide forward and take his arm. "Then let's go somewhere more private. Perhaps we can entertain each other."

Later, as we sprawl glazed with sweat in his bed, he asks the inevitable question:

"Don't you get lonely out there?"

In two hundred and fifty years of shipping, no lover has failed to ask this tedious question. And I have never failed to evade it.

"There's an entire solar system of drama to keep me company. Not much to do on those months in transit except plug into all the news streams." I force lightness into my laugh.

"But what about real people? A family?"

"I have a tremendous family—a solar system full of people dependent on me." I turn my face to the pillow. "Besides, having a family comes with challenges. You obviously know that."

He huffs a stray curl from his forehead. "That old bastard doesn't care about anything but profit. He's got warehouses full of coral and he's raking in ten times what it's worth, at the expense of our reputation." A sigh swells his chest and my fingernail, tracing an idle path along his ribs, sinks

into his flesh. “But he’s right about one thing. We don’t have the ships to seize a planet. All we’ve got are a few old trade hulks like yours. Building new ones would cost a fortune.”

“Even for a man with his own magnesium mines?” I lever onto an elbow and look him in the face. “If you let Lakshmi resume its normal production and invested in ships, rather than colonizing Parvati, you could have a fleet to rival the Federation.”

Something ignites in his eyes—moonlight, or reckless inspiration. “You think so?”

“Suggest it at that meeting. Your investors might be eager for strong leadership.”

He slithers out from the luxurious sheets and leans against the penthouse window. “I doubt it. They’re all conservative coin-counters like my father. I could never persuade them to take a risk.” Pearly light from the moons envelops him in a soft corona, accentuating the firm planes of his body. Strangely, I think of Parvati, a lush new world awaiting the nudge of development. I join him at the glass. Vaikuntha’s capital city shimmers far below, a fractal of spires and lights at the vertex of multiple solar systems.

“It was a struggling colony, once,” the Heir murmurs. “From nothing, it grew into all this. I can’t imagine how.”

“Time. Persistence. And daring,” I whisper against the delicate helix of his ear. “That after-dinner cocktail...does your father drink it often?”

He looks puzzled. “Every night. Why?”

“It’s made from a red algae native to Saraswati. If it’s not stored properly, it turns poisonous. Wouldn’t that be a tragic accident?”

Fear and awe blossom in his dark eyes. He begins to say something, but I lay my finger against his lips and draw him back to bed.

Head of ColonyCorp Found Dead; Successor Vows to Quell Saraswati Rebellion

Magnesium Surpasses Gold as Top Lakshmi Export

Vaikuntha’s Secret Shipyard: Who’s Funding the Fleet?

I’m snickering through the exposé when a priority transmission obliterates all the other panels.

“New orders,” I murmur to the ship, tracing the ColonyCorp authorization code in the letterhead. The central computer unzips the attached course correction and presents a new route for my approval.

“Skip Saraswati and proceed straight to Lakshmi?” I shake my head and switch to manual input. “That doesn’t fit my pattern.”

I fly loops around Saraswati for weeks, hovering obsessively over the nav display until a cluster of non-celestial objects appears at the edge of the parsec. I’ve already reversed sail when the proximity alarm blares. Deceleration takes days, my pulse quickening in inverse proportion to the ship’s speed. At last I drift out from behind Saraswati’s largest moon and fling up an arm to shade my eyes. Reflected light blazes across an expanse of brilliant sails. An armada rings Saraswati, blocking its elevator and launch points. The sleek vessels make my faithful old freighter look like scrap. No scars from asteroids or space junk mar their hulls. Instead of the aluminum-coated polymer, their sails fly magnesium foil, a swarm of delicate silver wings. Lovely and impractical, like their master.

Bright fragments gleam near the elevator; focusing my ship’s telescope, I catch my breath at a chain of shuttles, undoubtedly ferrying displaced colonists away from their repossessed world. Memories burst like blood vessels in my brain.

...a cramped, squalid ascent to orbit, muttering insurrection in corners while our home shrinks beneath us and rage swells in our hearts...

...A legion of ColonyCorp enforcers in faceless armor, herding us into shuttles...

...Hand squeezing mine in our final vow, our last frontier together...

...Snatching the gun from an officer’s belt, the grip cold as judgment in my palm...

Blinking away the sting of tears, I turn to the controls. Twists of a dial angle my sails to concentrate rays. A rallying cry almost three centuries old echoes from my lips and I hurl a spear of sunlight towards the nearest ship. Its sheets

quiver against the searing beam. Magnesium makes finer sails, responsive to the faintest kiss of photons, but at the sacrifice of heat tolerance. This close to the planet, oxygen molecules might be on my side.

I hone the light and the ColonyCorp sail ignites in a stunning flare. The shuttles veer away, panicked. I aim for the next ship, then the next, until magnesium ribbons litter Saraswati's exosphere and only a single warship drifts unbroken. I take several long, slow breaths before scrambling my ship's signature and switching to an open comm channel.

"ColonyCorp officers, you will release the inhabitants of Saraswati to the elevator. Then board the ship I've left you and set a course back to Vaikuntha before I destroy your only way home."

A torrent of profanity surges through the static, but they comply. When the lone ship streaks off towards the inner ring, I take my own shuttle to the elevator's orbit station. Celebration envelops me. Calloused hands shake mine. Faces—weathered with sun, salt, and struggle—beam more brightly than my solar missiles. All strangers, all achingly familiar.

An old man pushes through the exuberant crowd. "Hell of a way to finish a fight you started with some leftover mining caps." Grinning, he embraces me like a comrade with his single arm.

"I started it long before that," I whisper into his shoulder. "And I haven't quite finished it yet."

I don't descend to Lakshmi, but request that the Matriarch meet me at the elevator's orbit station. When the car docks a few days later, a young woman climbs out. I've never seen anyone look so stiff in microgravity, floating with arms knotted across her chest.

"Have you come to represent the Matriarch?" I ask her, bowing.

"I am the Matriarch," says the girl bluntly. "The last one died eight years ago. Silicosis from the gold mines."

"I'm sorry for that. She was a dedicated leader." I study the familiar proud jaw. "You're her granddaughter, aren't you? You have her looks."

She lifts her chin. "I have her strength, too. That's why they chose me to lead the independent government."

"Congratulations. On your election, and on paying off the indenture." The coppery planet below us shimmers, as if freed of some shaded mantle.

"We had a magnesium rush when ColonyCorp decided to build that big repo fleet, the one that disappeared. It financed our freedom." The young Matriarch glares at her boots. "Not that it does us much good now."

"What do you mean?"

"The last freight operator who stopped here said ColonyCorp might abandon the Tridevi System. Apparently their investors weren't happy about what happened on Saraswati." The girl's hands, aged beyond the rest of her body, clench and unclench in stubborn fists. "They may exploit us, but they're our only link to the rest of the sector. No one else comes out here to the stinking rear end of the universe. What's the use of controlling our own resources if we can't trade?"

"If you've really inherited your grandmother's spirit, you'll see a solution." I nudge her arm so she drifts toward the observation window. She makes an offended sound at the contact, but it dissolves into a gasp of disbelief when she registers the view. An entire fleet, crippled but still shining, hovers obediently above Lakshmi.

"Those...those are..."

"Interstellar-class cruisers, barely used." I grin at her. "They'll need new sails, but that shouldn't be a challenge for your magnesium industry."

"We can start our own merchant routes," she whispers, incredulous fingers brushing the scratched pane. "Without ColonyCorp's tariffs and embargoes!"

I nod. "I think the system will thrive, once you connect with your neighbors."

"Neighbors?" She tears her eyes from the ships and looks at me, confused. "We only have one. Saraswati."

"For now."

"My own damn ships!" The Heir flings aside his news pad and paces along the window. Backlit, the silver streaks in his curls gleam like magnesium explosions in deep space. The color makes me smile. "The pirates that attacked my fleet must've sold off the ships, and now those outer-ring savages are running independent trade convoys. I can't even collect fees because ColonyCorp no longer controls the planets."

"How inconvenient."

"Somewhere my father is laughing at me." He hurls himself back into his chair, a sulky expression twisting his mouth. We're near the same biological age now, but he still looks like a petulant boy, slouching inside his sumptuous clothes. "Tridevi has been a disaster. If I get out now, there might be enough left to carry on our business elsewhere."

"So you asked me here to fire me."

The Heir nods. "Total dissolution of operations in this system. Releasing personnel, liquidating assets...I even auctioned off Parvati this morning." He scowls up at the holographic portrait of his father, glaring from a parade of humorless ancestors on the wall. "Generations saving that little gem for the right turn of the market, and some anonymous buyer snaps it up for a pittance."

"I wouldn't call it a pittance--it took me three hundred years to save up."

"It was you?" He gapes. "What are you going to do with an undeveloped planet?"

"Rebuild the life you stole from me." I lean across his desk, my knuckles cracking on the polished slab. "You asked me once if I had a family. I did. Parents, siblings, someone I loved...most of them died scraping to repay the debt, and the rest were killed when we fought repossession."

"What are you talking about?"

"Shakti!" I slap both palms on the desk. "My home. My world, which ColonyCorp destroyed."

He mouths the name, a faint crease between his brows. "Then why come work for us?"

"Because you gave me the most powerful weapon I could ever hope to wield against you--time," I growl. "No one wants to be a freight operator, caught between light-years and temporal

years, unmoored from belonging. ColonyCorp hired me without question and made its enemy almost immortal. I had lifetimes to shape events on the indentured planets."

At last, comprehension seeps into the Heir's face. "You sparked the Saraswati rebellion!"

"And a hundred little conditions that led to it." I echo a dead man's dismissal, twenty years gone. "My centuries observing the universe were not vain. I grasp its natural order."

He shrinks deeper into the upholstery. "All to avenge a backwater outpost on some uncivilized rim world?"

"No. I can never bring back what I've lost." I flex my hands to dispel the ghosts of fingers laced into mine; the Heir cringes, seeing only a fist. "I just wanted to save the rest of Tridevi from the same fate."

"By sabotaging our business!" He half-rises from his seat. "I should call security right now and have you arrested!"

The office's smooth contours multiply my laughter and send it cascading back over us in peals of derision. "For what? Any crimes I've committed are decades old now. There will be few witnesses and even less evidence. The only person who'd even guess at my role is you." I grin at him, a predatory flash of teeth.

Gold and coral signet rings chatter against the arms of his chair as he trembles. "What do you want from me?"

Turning to the window, I lean my forehead against the cool glass. Vaikuntha's capital pulses below, a great chromed heart with human cells flowing through its arteries and avenues. How many of those cells have lived and died in the course of my existence, and still the whole beats on? "I want your records of all the settlers ColonyCorp evicted from repossessed planets. I'm going to find them and offer them a new start on Parvati."

"That could take years!" the Heir exclaims.

I raise my eyes from the city to the mountains beyond, where the space elevator's glittering umbilicus connects the planet to infinity. "I can wait."