



*“The furnace atmosphere sizzled across his face. The heat stole his breath, and his lungs steamed. When he could speak, he called out her name.”*

## Noldus and Vespa

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"Noldus and Vespa" deals with being consumed by passion (heat), as well as a relationship so damaged that the only repair is lethal.

**N**oldus came to Vespa on the last hot day of the boiling Earth. The sun loomed in the sky, quivering with anticipation for the nova that would engulf it like an orgasm. Today was the day. The last day. Dark clouds crossed the sun's red surface. The world — those who could not afford passage elsewhere — sank into a fevered sweat and waited for the end.

It was not that Noldus could not afford passage. He could one hundred times over. He could have gone to bright Zirnish or the colonies that beaded the rings of Amarath like glossy pearls. It was by choice that Noldus came to Vespa, to be with her as the world burned away.

What fires she had awoken in him. His flames rose in flickering patches of tenderness and rage. She had promised to awaken passion in him, beyond his ability to endure.

The doormen were gone. The doors were open. Their sliding mechanism had failed in the oppressive heat. Noldus let himself in. The lifts were inoperative, but his power suit assisted him up the dizzying flights of stairs, kept him cool as he approached Vespa's lair close upon the engorged sun.

These things that she could never have afforded on her own, hers now because the world had been abandoned.

Noldus found her at the tower's bright zenith, lying naked in the hot bath. The cold tap was turned all the way on. Though the machinery had long ago lost maximum efficiency, it still kept the water from boiling. Vespa had shaved herself bald trying



to keep cool, but her skin was blistered by the relentless sun. He could see the needle marks in her arms. Noldus released the catches on his face mask. The furnace atmosphere sizzled across his face.

The heat stole his breath, and his lungs steamed. When he could speak, he called out her name. In times past, she would have fought him, or run from him. Now she just waited, languid in the water, as he approached. Looking down at her, he felt his blood quicken. After so much pain, so much time, he still wanted her.

He knelt beside her, and injected a stimulant into the bruised interior of her elbow. It took several minutes for the stimulant to work. Eventually, Vespa's head rolled slowly toward him, and her eyes met his. Noldus saw that she recognized him. Her voice was slow and thick with painkillers.

"Have you come to take me away?"

"No. The last ship left, hours ago." He paused. "Would you have gone?"

"Not with you. But I would have gone."

He crouched down to touch the water, but to his gloved finger everything was cool. He peeled one glove off to feel the heat. His skin was thatched with fine scars. He could feel the sun burning the skin on his face. It would not be long now, and he could endure it.

"I never meant to hurt you," Noldus said. "You know that."

"But you did."

Her voice sounded clearer now. The stimulant was working.

"Yes." He began to remove the suit. The heat broiled him, piece by piece, raising blisters across his shoulders. "Time and again." The hair on his arms and back shriveled, spicing the stink of boiling skin and scorched concrete.

"Even now, being here.." Her breath caught. The stimulant he had administered was wearing away her anesthetic drugs. The heat came again like a solid wall of pain.

"But time has run out, and I'll never hurt you again."

There had been so many betrayals, the ever-widening gap between his riches and her poverty, until any hand he reached to her was a purchase, any hand she might have reached to him was a pleading.

Naked, he settled next to the bath, waiting for that moment when the heat would burn away pain, and hatred, and love. Waiting for her to reach for him. Waiting to be with her, once more, before the erupting sun engulfed the world.

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