

A Dinner Party

A story originally by Sharon Best

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CNN blared loudly from the wall-mounted TV as terrifying images from the latest terrorist attack filled the screen. For the first time since the techno-terror attacks had begun, CNN's high-powered cameras were rolling before an attack started. This time, the whole world could see with their own eyes what experts had been claiming for months – that these attackers had weapons that no military on Earth possessed.

Brilliant beams crossed LAX at light-speed to strike several security vehicles and a fire engine, the scene looking like it belonged in a SciFi movie trailer. The flashes of unholy light turned security vehicles into a sphere of sparks that faded into the nothingness. Total annihilation. When the beams struck the fire engine, they vaporized chunks the size of a small car. It looked like very good CGI except that real firemen and police had been inside those vehicles. Men and women who would never come home to their families again. People who no longer existed except as a few stray ions.

The camera switched to zoom in on an AirWest 737 that was taxiing back toward the terminal at high speed. The announcer was claiming that LAX had been shut down and was under an immediate evacuation order. Those words were barely out of her mouth when a beam sliced through the cockpit of the 737, vaporizing everything forward of the nose gear. Suddenly headless, with severed wires dangling and sparking, the airliner continued taxiing, engines spooled above ground idle as it headed straight for the docked aircraft at the gates. A heroic fire engine driver crashed at an angle into what was left of the nose as he tried to turn the plane, only to have the front

gear collapse to pin his fire engine beneath the plane. That horrible beam flashed again, this time cutting the 737 completely in half at the wing root. The two pieces of fuselage fell apart to spill passengers onto the tarmac along with thousands of gallons of jet fuel which consumed both the aircraft and fire engine in an inferno of flames and black smoke.

Mike Finnerty gasped in horror as the camera shifted to pan along the gates, showing dozens of other aircraft parked there, many with passengers on-board, all easy targets for the beams. The camera paused on a Delta Airbus at the far end of the terminal, and the beams struck, vaporizing the middle of the Airbus. Fuel gushed from severed wing tanks as the two sections fell inward to turn the gate area into a flaming holocaust.

Panic ensued as the passengers on planes who'd witnessed the explosions tried frantically to get off, trampling confused passengers who were still trying to get down the jetways. People opened emergency exits and doors to spill onto the wings or leap without the benefit of slides. Plane after plane erupted as panicky passengers ignored crew instructions as they fought to escape the horrible beams.

This was a new kind of terror – using live cable news to unwittingly choose the next target, guaranteeing that their terror would be seen live and unfiltered. That sick realization glued billions to their screens, their guts twisting with dread as they saw with fatal foresight what the CNN camera crews had not yet realized – that they were directing the attack. The cameras zoomed in on yet another object, a strange one that hovered over the mid-point of a runway. Too small to be an aircraft, too large for a drone. The annihilating beams once again followed the camera, and the object flared like a tiny sun.

CNN briefly cut to a camera in the terminal that showed people covering their eyes as they were forced to look away from the blinding glare out on the runway, and

then that view flared into pure whiteness before the video feed thankfully went black. CNN cut to another camera, this one located out in a parking lot. Smoke could be seen rising from two of the terminals. That camera turned to focus on a Kuwaiti Airbus 380 that was flaring on its final approach. The engines suddenly began to spin up as the crew saw the miniature sun in their path and started a go-around. They had positive rate and looked like they were going to climb over it when one of the beams sliced through the left outboard engine, cutting it cleanly in half. The un-contained engine halves exploded to send red-hot turbine and fan blades flying for hundreds of yards in all directions, some of them sucking into the inner port engine as it ran at full thrust. The engine coughed as it burst into flames.

Having lost two engines on the same side, the pilots switched frantically from go-around power to reverse thrust as the Airbus slammed down hard, tires bursting as the huge plane squatted. The crew braked frantically, but the whole world could see that it wasn't slowing fast enough. One of CNN's announcers began to scream as the Airbus's nose reached that tiny sun, only to have the ball of flame fall to the runway, taking the beams down with it. The huge airliner ran over the miniature sun to ignite any tires that weren't already burning.

Flames and smoke were sucked forward into the still operating starboard engines, and their reverse thrust shot the black smoke further outward and ahead of the Airbus before enveloping it. The tail and wingtips of the great plane were all that was visible as it swerved to the right and departed the runway onto the grassy field where it briefly tilted far to the right, its right wingtip dangerously digging into the ground before the massive plane crashed back down on its gear to come to a shuddering stop as one of the massive center wheel carriages came flying out of the smoke to head directly toward the beams, blocking them from reaching the fuselage. The six-wheeled carriage burned away as it flew back down the beams, shrinking rapidly until it disap-

peared in a final puff of white smoke. A small brightly colored object remained to continue flying toward the beams.

People in the CNN studio began to cheer as they realized what millions of people already knew – the alien the media had named Supergirl was saving the day!

The blonde girl crossed her bared arms in front of herself as she continued to draw the power of those horrible weapons to herself. Behind her, the world watched with increasing hope as escape slides appeared along the right side of the huge Airbus and passengers and crew began a panicky evacuation. Fire trucks converged to foam down the burning left wing and undercarriage.

The blonde girl returned fire from her eyes, her smaller but equally brilliant beams taking the terrorists out one by one. A cheer went up as the final beamer was destroyed, but the girl didn't wait for thanks. She spun around to fly across the airport to land next to a Lufthansa Cargo Boeing 747-8 freighter that was circled by the flashing lights of Security vehicles. After a brief consultation with Security, she ran barefooted under the huge Boeing to disappear beneath the two center landing gear carriages.

CNN's powerful telephoto lenses zoomed in to show her rising up into the belly of the aircraft. She was going for the strongest structure she could find nearest the center of mass, just as she'd trained to do. Moments later, the five-hundred ton Boeing began to rise, its fuel-laden wings drooping as it began to move forward, skimming across the emptiest portion of LAX. The huge Boeing accelerated far faster than it could with its own engines, crossing the parallel runways and then out over the dunes and finally over the water to terrify a group of surfers as it clipped the foam off their waves at 400 knots, the still-extended landing gear doors ripping off in its wake.

Mike proudly watched her flying as low as possible to minimize the spread of any blast effects. She was starting to get good at this. A cloud of mist suddenly formed around the Boeing as she took it supersonic a half mile from the shore. The landing

gear ripped away as the wings and tail assembly fluttered, and then were themselves torn away by forces they'd never been designed to withstand, spilling tens of thousands of gallons of jet fuel in their wake. A gigantic rooster tail rose from behind the un-winged fuselage as the supersonic shockwave disappeared over the horizon.

The world began to collectively exhale when a huge flash lit the western sky. Some people at LAX dove for cover, but others just stared as a flaming, boiling mushroom cloud appeared in the distance, frozen in fear. Even worse, some were heedless of the approaching danger. Thankfully those with combat experience shouted for everyone to lay on the floor and cover their heads. Most did during the twenty seconds it took for the blast wave to arrive. CNN's last image from LAX showed a brilliant mushroom cloud rising over the horizon as all the windows exploded inward. It was the stuff of nightmares.

CNN quickly switched to a studio in New York where the shaken announcers said that all contact had been lost with LA. The entire world stared at their screens, unable to tear themselves away. Minutes passed as reports came in of a massive explosion near LA. A report from NORAD said the military was being put on highest alert. CNN's terrorism expert was so overcome he couldn't talk at first, and then when he did start, he couldn't stop, claiming this was very close to the worst-case scenario.

Then, abruptly, the video feed from LAX was back. A female reporter came on screen, her face cut and bleeding from the flying glass. She was interviewing an Army Colonel who said that the explosion "absolutely was not nuclear", despite what we'd all seen. He claimed the instruments at LAX hadn't recorded any bursts of radiation. He went on to claim that the big Boeing freighter had a payload close to 300,000 pounds. Much more if the terrorists had never intended it to fly. He said that would be enough to explain the mushroom cloud and powerful blast wave given just conventional explosives.

Mike prayed he was right as he glanced over at the clock. Ten minutes had passed since the explosion. Long enough, assuming she was Ok. Clearly she hadn't gone back to LAX or the cameras would have found her.

"Almost time, Bo," he said to the dog at his feet. "Get ready."

Bo looked up from where he was waiting for him to drop something tasty while making dinner, his head tilted and ears pricked.

"I'm serious, guy. Big bada boom."

The big yellow Lab flattened himself on the floor with his paws over his ears. Mike smiled as he reached down to scratch his head. Bo knew what bada boom meant.

Suspenseful minutes ticked past before a deafening sonic boom punched the house, the shock wave flexing the tempered-glass windows and walls to create an echo of itself inside, turning the internal waterfalls briefly into mist. An odd tremor continued afterward, forcing Mike to reach up to stop his hanging pots and pans from swinging.

Bo jumped to his feet to dash through his dog door, triggering the motion-detection lights on the deck. Glancing out the window to check on him, Mike was surprised to see a huge cloud of fine snow billowing upward. That was very strange given the mountain ridge he lived on was in the midst of one of the heaviest snowfalls this winter. The upward billowing snow cloud briefly won the battle before it was finally overcome, and the big falling flakes returned.

As amazing as that display of nature was, that wasn't what he was looking for. He walked to the window and leaned against the glass to look upward in anticipation, and moments later his heart skipped a beat as a young blonde woman floated slowly down to hover like an angel, her bare feet just above the thick layer of new snow that had already fallen. She wore a hip-hugging red miniskirt and a tight blue top that ta-

pered to a choker, leaving her midriff bare. A long red scarf was attached to her choker.

Bo ran toward her, snow flying as he wagged his tail wildly while leaping high up into the arms of his favorite person. Smiling, Mike walked over to open the door and lean out. "Hey, we were just watching you on CNN. Bo was worried."

Anja laughed as she hugged the big dog, burying her face in his warm fur as the flakes began to cover both of them. "Poor Bo. Don't you know yet that nothing can hurt me?" After a long hug, she lifted her head to smile at Mike with dimpled cheeks, her blue eyes sparkling. She looked so innocent. So untouched. It didn't seem possible that this was the same girl he'd just seen shrugging off alien death beams on TV. Not to mention having been blown up as she carried that big Boeing out to sea.

"Sorry about the avalanche," she shrugged. "The bottom of your road is buried now. Had to come in hot."

"I'll say. That was one hell of a sonic boom. Not that you'd notice given the way your day has gone. Things looked completely horrific at LAX. Hundreds are reported dead. Are you OK?"

"Remember how I was telling you that NORAD was tuning their ballistic missile radars to pick up my suborbs?" she said excitedly, ignoring his last question. "Well, I found a glitch in their software."

Leave it to Anja to be more interested in that. She had a knack for compartmentalizing her thoughts. Hundreds had died but she'd saved thousands. Tens of thousands if that Boeing freighter had detonated at LAX. She'd done her best and that was more than anyone else could. She believed that the math told the story, saved versus lost, and she refused to dwell on sentimentality or regret for those she'd been unable to help. It was one of the least human things about her.

"You reverse-engineered NORAD's software?"

“Well... not exactly. But we know that every object, from meteors to warheads, slows while entering the atmosphere thanks to good old air friction. I figured their software would filter out anomalous radar tracks so as to improve the tracking of hostile targets. Their code base is very old and originally ran on slow computers. So, I accelerate during re-entry to ensure I’m tagged as an anomaly.”

Mike chuckled, amazed that this was what she wanted to talk about, not the attack back at LAX. “That should be your middle name: Anomaly.”

She gave him her ‘that’s dumb but kinda funny’ look. She has a thousand looks. “Whatever. The important thing is that I was able to test my theory this morning when I was out at Edwards. We had an inflight emergency with one of the Aurora 2 drones. It was burning toward Hawaii at Mach 5, and it wasn't responding to guidance – Pacific COMSAT had unexpectedly gone off-line. Given the drone had enough fuel on-board to reach China, people were freaking. Nobody knew how long the SAT would be down, so I did a quick suborb to turn the drone around long enough to reacquire the Atlantic COMSAT with its forward antenna, weak as the signal was.”

She said that so casually, but in reality Mike knew it was more like:

Run into an unused room, remove dark contact lenses and undress while removing her brown wig and undoing her tightly-bound hair, then put on a uniform made of symbiotic genetically-engineered beings from a distant star, run out on a balcony and leap into the sky to accelerate faster than the eye could follow, up and out of the atmosphere and then accelerate further to incredible speed in the vacuum of space to re-enter at meteoric speed over Hawaii to catch a thirty-ton scramjet flying Mach 5, turn it around and fly it back eastward until Edwards reacquired control. Then do another suborb back to Edwards, hoping no one would see the blaze of her re-entry, and land to duck back into that hopefully still empty room where she would strip naked while packing those symbiotic critters into her purse, then get dressed in her street clothes,

do up her hair and put in another pair of dark contacts and don her wig before stepping back into Flight Ops like she'd just completed a long visit to the ladies room, hoping that no one would notice that her chest was glowing very faintly with Orgone energy.

"And I was right!" she gushed. "My contact at NORAD says their computerized radar output didn't display my track coming or going. I was filtered out. Even better, Flight Ops thinks the drone reacquired the eastern COMSAT link on its own."

"What! Their first assumption wasn't a cute blonde in a miniskirt?"

"Cute, huh?" she asked, one eyebrow lifting.

She looked incredibly hot floating there, the falling snow melting and steaming on her mostly bare skin. Her uniform appeared to be made of an elasticized fabric which clung to her skin like paint. It was actually a mutagenic symbiotic organism that could perfectly mimic any clothing style she could imagine.

Her imagination today started with that red miniskirt. Above that, her blue midriff-baring top tapered to a red choker, leaving her shoulders, arms and most of her back bare. A small red and yellow stylized "S" was located in the center of her left breast, and a long red scarf suggested a cape.

What was far more impressive, however, was the girl beneath. Standing a slender 6'1" tall and athletically toned, her flawless skin glowed a remarkable shade of golden tan. Her slightly rounded face was lit by large blue eyes and surrounded by wavy blonde hair that fell to the small of her back. She exuded a "Kryptonian meets Anime" kind of Cosplay vibe.

Which was exactly the idea. Back when she'd first started talking about going public, their first concern had been to reduce the public freak-out factor in some way. Mike's approach was simplicity itself – he used familiar imagery. Stuff that everyone

had seen a thousand times. On TV. In comics. Movies. Supergirl had been the obvious choice.

The problem was that comic-book character had worn a large number of costume designs over the decades. Mike argued that Anja should just mimic a few of those, but she viewed her potential uniform as a form of body art. She wanted unique designs that accentuated, not covered.

Mike argued the other way. She was going to be on TV. There were limits. This was Earth. They were trying to invoke familiar imagery, not upset people.

It took them a long weekend to come to an agreement, most of which was spent trying on dozens of designs, some of them Mike's ideas, but mostly hers. His old cabin up in Montana was isolated enough to do the testing, which mostly involved hypersonic flight followed by a final Mach 2 dive into solid rock, which was the most severe uniform test they could think of. Most of the designs blew right off her, which was both sexy and amusing, to Mike at least. Especially given it took her some time to collect up the little critters that formed her clothing.

Given she's Velorian, they went down an increasingly sexy path until it became obvious to both of them that her exotic designs had gone too far. A single bared breast might be the height of Velorian fashion, but it wasn't going to work in front of the TV's of the world. They finally settled on a half dozen designs that she could morph between based on how she felt at any given moment. The breakthrough came when she started to imagine she was wearing paint instead of fabric. Her symbiotic clothing critters did their best to imitate that mental image, which resulted in a very thin fabric that clung to her skin no matter what.

"Tonight, CNN got the best video of you in action that I've seen yet, Anja. Turns out they were working on a documentary about a group of Chinese dignitaries who've been negotiating deals in the Middle East. That group was scheduled to arrive in LAX

from Kuwait on that Kuwaiti flight, so they had multiple cameras rolling when the shooting started.”

“I was afraid of that,” she frowned. “That’s all we’re going to see on CNN. Forever. Me getting blasted.”

“Hey, you're a bulletproof blonde from a distant galaxy who can fly. You stopped an attack that even the military couldn't. You’re always going to be the top story – like forever. As someone on CNN said tonight, the religious implications of your existence alone might change the world.”

She shook her head slowly. “You’ve read waaaay too many comic books, Mike. Nobody travels between galaxies. And we both know I'm anything but a goddess.”

Indeed, he had read too many, but she’d seemingly stepped from the pages of one. Her stunning blonde athleticism and fantastic abilities, not to mention her uniform’s deliberate homage to Kryptonian lore, had created riots whenever she appeared on late night talk shows. Everyone from fearful xenophobes to ecstatic comic book lovers to SciFi nerds filled the audience and overflowed into the streets for blocks around the studios. They were joined by marching white supremacists who claimed her as proof of their racial superiority agenda. Which was ironic given she wasn't truly human. Some Pagans went further, claiming she was one of their goddesses. The major religions went the other way, seeing her as a blasphemous threat to monotheism.

Anja tried to correct them all, arguing that her unusual talents were strictly physical, and they were both defined and bounded by her biology, much of which was still more-or-less human. That she was just an ordinary girl inside.

Mike alone seemed to understand and accept that. Others didn’t want to. Or couldn’t. Despite her good deeds, she either terrified or insulted half the planet. Most of the other half wanted to elevate her to godhood. The fires were still burning at LAX,

but already, fearful xenophobics were arguing with the wide-eyed cultists on every News channel. Others chanted “Jesus wasn’t an alien”. It was madness.

Mike hadn’t expected any of that when they started. He was just trying to avoid panic. But they both knew that breathless adulation mixed with xenophobic fear and topped with a frosting of religious zeal was not a healthy mix. Their PR campaign was in trouble, barely polling 50% on the “trust and confidence” message. It hadn’t started this way.

In the beginning, she was just a viral rumor, disbelieved by most, but embraced by a small group of geeks who studied crude videos and grainy photos. They also analyzed the scientific observations that had been captured, including hypersonic radar tracks. Most people chalked them up to crazed UFOers, but those true believers were doing science. They concluded that there was no possible way to fake all those observations without going full CGI. Which was impossible given the growing body of eyewitness accounts in distant places.

The world, faced with those early doubts and improbabilities, and driven by religious fervor of various kinds and a general lack of trust in the media, had decided it was easier to dismiss her than to believe in her. When the first high-quality pictures appeared on the Net, they screamed “high-budget publicity prank”, right down to the costume. Even if aliens had arrived, scientists argued, they certainly wouldn’t look like a blonde escapee from a comic book. Perfectly congruent parallel evolution was so improbable it verged on the impossible.

Anja finally decided to put all the rumors and arguments to bed by making an unplanned visit to Stephen Colbert’s Late Night show. She floated down to sit in the chair next to him moments before he was going to introduce his first scheduled guest. Her appearance was completely unplanned and unscripted, with Colbert as surprised as anyone else when she asked if she could come on his show to tell her story. To his

credit, he took it in stride and said he'd call her agent. She handed him her card and then floated up and away, a gust of wind sending papers flying. All so proper. And all so amazing.

The next 24 hours were a maelstrom that swamped out all other News. The entire planet tuned in to Colbert the next night to watch her juggle a couple of small cars in front of his desk – while floating in mid-air. Then she bent a huge I-beam across her chest as if it was made of rubber, and then tied it in a crude knot, the tortured steel groaning loudly. She finished by cutting it in half with the blinding beams from her eyes, sending molten metal spraying across the stage.

A couple of construction workers in the audience were invited up to examine the pieces of mangled beam, and they claimed it was truly made of good old US Steel. She hugged those men to her side as she flew them out into the audience to drop them back in their seats. The entire audience stared up at her in awe as she flew circles over their heads, pausing briefly to take a young girl who was fighting cancer for the flight of her life. It was one thing to see a flying girl on TV or in some comic, but it was entirely different to experience that silent floating in person. Bird wings made far more noise than she did.

She finally floated down to sit beside Colbert at his desk. He handed her a softball-sized chunk of solid chrome steel as they'd pre-arranged, and she began to casually work the steel into the crude shape of a duck, the tortured alloy screaming softly as it grew so hot from friction that it glowed redly. When she was done, she rested her animal sculpture on Colbert's desk while telling a story about a misadventure she'd had when she was five years old.

Her story involved a Donald Duck costume and a bunch of freaked-out duck hunters who fired all their shells at this freakily oversized duck that kept buzzing back and forth over their heads while quacking strangely. While they were busy blasting her

Halloween costume to bits, the real ducks safely flew away. She showed comedic talent by making the plight of those poor hunters and saving those ducks outrageously funny, not to mention her adoptive mother's angry reaction when she returned home wearing that shot up rag of a costume.

The world went insane with speculation after that, wondering where she'd been since her five-year-old misadventure. Others angrily wondered why she was just showing herself now. She could have been saving people all those years. Whatever their feelings, everyone wanted to see more of her. Every reporter on the planet wanted to interview her. Yet she only accepted invitations to late night TV shows, figuring that humor and informality would make her presence and her story go down easier.

Besides, it was hilarious watching the show hosts trying to keep their cool as she floated next to them in one of her tiny uniforms. She would tease them by very gradually floating higher and higher until the host found himself looking up under her skirt. Their various embarrassed attempts to continue interviewing her without staring up were both varied and hilarious. Once the audience started laughing at the host's plight, she'd relent to float back down to her chair. There she'd cross her long legs, her tiny skirt teasing the camera with what it barely covered.

The overt sexiness was Mike's idea to further soften First Contact paranoia. There was nothing scary about a beautiful and sexy young woman.

She appeared on all the late night shows, but she liked Colbert best given they were both hard-core Tolkien nerds. She returned to his show several times in an attempt to beat him at LOTR lore, but failed each time, proving she was anything but omnipotent. Instead, she joined the show's *Stay Human* band to play a Robby Krieger-inspired electric guitar on a couple of old *Doors* songs. That led to a Dueling Banjos contest where she picked an electric banjo faster than anyone had ever seen before,

never missing a note. She was so happy playing her personal tunes and performing that long banjo duet that she had tears in her eyes by the time she finished.

That was the good part. The bad was that every alphabet agency in government desperately wanted to interrogate her or worse. The military tried to be insistent about it, but she eluded them all by flying off at fantastic speed whenever someone tried to detain her. They tried to threaten her with force or imprisonment, but she just laughed at them, confident that no cell or containment building could hold her. She wanted nothing to do with any government goons. In her mind, even Presidents and Prime Ministers fell into the goon category. Some especially so.

"Did you see what they blasted me with tonight?" she asked, interrupting Mike's slightly stoned reverie. "Those were NOT weapons from Earth. I'm telling you, Mike, the Arions are here. Hiding somewhere. Probably have a stealth ship in orbit."

"I know, I was watching. Along with a few billion other people."

"Hope I didn't look too dorky."

"Dorky?" Given her accent, it came out *duerky*. "Trust me, when people see you floating on air wearing that tiny bit of nothing with all that golden skin, blonde hair everywhere, legs a mile long, dorky is NOT what they're thinking."

She laughed. "You humans are too easily impressed. Back home I'd be considered very ordinary."

She was far too modest. Her insanely conditioned body screamed late-twenties fitness freak, but her cutely dimpled cheeks and rounded face with those big blue eyes looked ten years younger. Both were way off. She tells the wildest stories about the mid 60's Summer of Love. Back when her face and the calendar agreed. She claims to have been the inspiration for the *Doors* songs "Hello, I love You" and "Light my Fire" among others. She was one of the original Hippies, and she'd seen more than her share of sex, drugs and rock and roll. The fact that she'd later turned to studying aero-

space engineering was remarkable given that background. But when your lifespan is measured in centuries, you have time to be many things.

Still, she was a paradox. She came across as slightly innocent and eager to learn, modest and perpetually bright-eyed, which meant her personality matched her face far more than the calendar. She did her best to play her looks down, refusing to acknowledge that anything was different about her, and gave an evil eye and cold shoulder to anyone who dared mention her appearance, even tangentially.

"That big bang at the end was godawful, Anja, what with the way it took out the windows back at LAX. Everyone was thinking nuclear due to the mushroom cloud. I started to get worried when you didn't reappear at the airport."

She gave a girlish shrug as Bo jumped down to the snowy deck. He rolled on his back to rub his fur in the deepening snow. "They had things under control given all the terrorists had dropped dead, and I didn't want to miss your party. Plus we were rudely interrupted this morning. I want to push Continue."

Mike's heart skipped a couple of beats like it always does when she said something corny but sexy like that. Hanging out with engineers was obviously rubbing off on her. She took a deep breath to draw his eyes down to the stretched out 'S' on her firm boob.

"I always figured I was totally un-hurttable, Mike, but those were annihilation weapons of some kind. They actually hurt, so much so that I had to convert a lot of their power to Orgone to keep cool. Good thing this top stretches." She glanced down at herself, her bust-line noticeably larger than it had been this morning. "Maybe I should morph my uniform into something with less of a target on it."

The distorted "S" faded, leaving her with a solid blue top.

"That's kind of boring. And it isn't the "S" they shoot at."

"My poor boobs say otherwise. But if that's how it's going to be, maybe I need to give them an easier target. With all the energy I just absorbed, maybe this one will work." Her top turned white as if by magic, the skintight fabric spreading over her arms, shoulders and back while an oval window opened wide over her breasts.

Mike just gawked at her, stunned as always by her real-time clothing transformation.

"As I see it, the bullets that don't get trapped under this top will just blunt softly away. Safer for bystanders that way."

He laughed as a flush of excitement raced through him. "Your chest isn't a shooting range."

"Feels like one."

"Well, I've got a much better use for your boobs."

She enjoyed having her breasts held more than any woman he'd known. Something about having far more nerve endings than a human woman.

"How long is this dinner thingy of yours going to be, anyway?"

"Too damn long," he smiled, "but its been awhile since I saw my friends. And they're going to love meeting you."

"They're going to think less of you, Mike. No man your age should be dating a girl who looks as young as I do."

"They're friends," Mike shrugged. "And Ted and Rick know who you are. They'll be cool."

"I was thinking of their wives."

"I don't judge myself by what others think. And as far as the costume thing goes, Powergirl has never worn a skirt."

"But you know you love it, Mike," she teased, her already micro skirt shrinking further as she spoke.

His heart pounded. He'd always been an outrageous fan of miniskirts, and her legs had seemingly been made for one. Once she'd discovered his weakness, she'd started prancing around the house wearing only her skirt when she wanted him to take her to bed. Subtlety is not a Velorian trait.

"Hold that look for later, my dear. But right now we have guests on the way. I need to be able to walk and talk at the same time. And since when does PG have hair down to her ass?"

"Ahhh, Mike... I hate to harsh your buzz, but she isn't real."

"Lots of people don't think you are either. And so what if those shooters hit you with a few stray glimmers. Since when do light beams hurt you?"

"A few stray glimmers huh? I'll have you know that each of those beams was powerful enough to melt a main battle tank. Not just coherent light but some kind of charged particle thingy that came down the beams. Every attack I stop seems to involve more powerful weapons than the previous. It's like someone is testing me. I mean, what's next? Nukes? Anti-matter bombs?"

"Somehow I think you'll weather them as well," he shrugged, trying as always to put on a brave front. In reality, he was always terrified when Anja just stood there and let the bad guys blast her with all manner of exotic weapons and explosives. He figured she secretly enjoyed it.

"I tried to take them alive again, Mike, but just like before, every one of those assholes carried an exploding capsule in their head. They dropped dead right after I fried their weapons. Which, by the way, also self-destructed. Someone's controlling them. Exploiting them. But who would voluntarily submit to having something like that put in their head?"

"That's the real mystery. CNN had spokespeople from the NSA, CIA, FBI and a bunch of other alphabet soup agencies on tonight, including a White House

spokesman. They went on and on about why they weren't this and why they weren't that. The one thing they wouldn't say is 'not from this Earth'. If this is like the previous attacks, they won't be able to identify who the dead guys are. They're like ghosts. No fingerprints on file. No dental records. No ID of any kind. No distinguishing marks. They come from various races and ethnicities, which doesn't match any terrorist profile. All men. An army of dead John Doe's."

She shook her head, blonde hair flying. "That's just the bullshit the government is feeding the public, Mike. It's the Arions, trust me. They probably abducted and brain-washed those poor bastards and turned them into zombie terrorists with a shelf-life."

"When you look into their eyes, what do you see?"

She took a deep breath and shivered slightly. "Fanatical determination. Absolute terror. Eyes wild. Full-on adrenaline rushes, but that could also be the PCP. They have to know they're going to die, yet they fear something else even more. I can't imagine what would scare them more than having their heads explode."

"Maybe the Arions are holding their children or whatever. But we should be able to identify at least some of them."

"Not if they brought these poor bastards from one of their client worlds."

Mike blinked as he stared at her, wondering why he hadn't thought of that. "Of course. Those planets were all seeded from Earth nearly as long ago as yours."

Anja's planet had been settled from a very narrow Viking-era gene pool. The Galen had abducted her isolated village in what would later become Sweden and used her ancestors for their experiments. Which explained why she looked like a Nordic dream, what with her blonde hair turning white with the falling snow and those blue eyes sparkling. Some of the northern Scanian villages of that time hadn't interbred with outsiders for centuries, and her direct ancestors certainly hadn't after being removed from Earth. Which meant she looked exactly like an ancient Nordic girl from

the pre-Viking era. Proof that not everything on Earth had improved over the centuries.

"You do know that invulnerability is always relative, Anja? Whatever the armor, someone will always make a better bullet. Have you considered doing something other than just standing there and soaking up all that punishment until they find that better bullet? Maybe you could discover a way to remove that thing in their heads or block the signals. Tin foil hats. RF jammers. Whatever. We need a survivor who will talk."

"No choice," she said, shaking her head to send the snow flying. "If I dodge their weapons, then the stray shots will kill a lot more innocent people. You saw that at LAX. But if I stand perfectly still, they focus on me."

"That's kind of scary, don't you think? That they have you all figured out. You shouldn't just let them have their way with you. I always thought that was my job."

Her face softened to a broad smile, her cute dimples making his knees go weak. "I'm counting on that. I mean, assuming no one decides to wipe out another airport or nuke a city tonight."

The news across most of the planet these last months had been dominated by attacks on military vehicles that ended in molten metal and bodies burned beyond recognition. Gunships had been vaporized in mid-air. Fighter jets blasted into glowing trails that faded into nothingness. Heavy armor melted into puddles with their crews cremated inside. Even worse, a half dozen airliners had exploded during landing or takeoff in Europe. Others had mysteriously disappeared over the ocean with no traces found. But never with weapons as powerful as this attack at LAX.

"Well, at least the air wasn't full of bullets and missiles this time," he shrugged.

“Bullets aren’t so bad,” she said, hands covering her mostly bare chest. “They can really tickle. Exploding rockets are a thrill if they hit just the right place. Then there’s the grenades. Those are always fun.”

She had to be the first person in history to call an exploding grenade “fun”. During her first major public appearance during the New Year’s attack in Times Square, she’d knelt down on the snow-covered concrete to scoop a half dozen fragmentary grenades under her skirt before they exploded. The blast launched her skyward like a rocket, leaving a blackened crater in the pavement. The people closest to her were blown off their feet, but no one was truly injured.

Then, when the terrorists attacked the crowd with automatic weapons fire and dozens more fragmentary grenades, Anja moved faster than eyes could follow, arriving in front of people just before the bullets struck to deflect them harmlessly away. She smothered grenades either by exploding them in her hands or wrapping them up under her skirt. Meanwhile, she took the terrorists down one at a time with carefully aimed bursts of laser vision that were focused on their weapons.

The attackers didn’t stop even then. They were so pumped up (on insane doses of PCP as the autopsy revealed) that they resorted to knives and bare fists. Anja calmly let them come at her again and again, each wave of human violence crashing against her mostly bare skin like the surf exhausting itself on a rocky shore. Then, when the terrorists were bruised and bleeding from their self-inflicted wounds, their knives dulled or broken, their knuckles shattered from impacting her steel-hard bones, handgun magazines emptied at point-blank range into her face, their final grenades bursting in her hands, she let the cops take over to make the final arrests. She didn’t find out until much later that all the shooters simultaneously dropped dead while being transported to jail, their eyes bugging out of their heads, ears bleeding.

An hour after that first attack she was in Chicago at midnight and was able to preempt a smaller attack there. Then another attack in Denver an hour after that. Finally in Seattle, where she wrapped herself around a very powerful backpack bomb seconds before it was set to detonate at Pike's Market.

Unfortunately, by the time she arrived for a private celebration here at Mike's mountain top home, the champagne had long gone flat. They drank it anyway as they celebrated in Velorian style: naked in Mike's oversized Jacuzzi. Combat was always a huge turn-on for her. A celebration that lasted until Mike discovered bits of very sharp shrapnel in a very wrong place.

It hadn't been the kind of New Year's celebration he'd hoped for, what with the red roses he'd sprinkled around the house. It was supposed to end with a great breakfast and New Years day in bed. But she wasn't just his girl now; she was the world's.

He blinked those memories away. "The problem, my dear, isn't what you wear. You just don't look tough enough. Everyone underestimates you."

She sighed as her uniform morphed back to the red and blue outfit she'd arrived in. "Yet you said this Kryptonian thing would make me look formidable, Mike. That it would intimidate the bad guys. Instead, this "S" seems to just make me a target."

"Actually, I was hoping for something recognizable and friendly but powerful. But the real problem is how you look. People don't equate young and beautiful with powerful. I can't fix that. We probably should have gone with something black and armored and lethal looking with a mask. Spikes sticking out or whatever. That would have made you look older and tougher."

"I don't have near enough *clo'taer* for that," she laughed. "Remember, I was only five when I came to Earth. I have to stretch the little bit I have around this body. Besides, I really like the mythology of Supergirl. I feel proud when I wear her colors."

He grinned broadly. "Definitely. Absolutely. And I suspect that after tonight's blow-by-blow CNN coverage, many of your remaining skeptics are going to disappear. Their cameras were on super-zoom. If you'd had a freckle, they would have blown it up to fill the screen. Oh, and you'll love this, those nutty Odinists officially declared you a Valkyrie tonight."

"Gee, does that mean I get a pay raise?"

"Yup. A really big one. Unfortunately a billion times zero is still zero. But I'm sure they'll invite you to dance naked under the full moon at their festivals. Or whatever pagans do."

"Been there, done that. And they don't just dance. Best sex, ever."

Mike frowned. Every time he started thinking of Anja as young and innocent, she said something like that. Bo bumped against his legs as he ran circles around them, snow flying as he started barking wildly.

"I think Bo is wondering if you're going to let me in or just stare at me all night with that silly look on your face?" she said with a wink. "It's really snowing now."

"God forbid you get injured by falling snowflakes, my lady."

She smirked as she landed barefoot in the snow to walk into the house with Bo striding proudly beside her. Mike stared at her back, adoring the way her long, sunshine blonde hair mingled with her red scarf to reveal flashes of her powerfully-defined back. The hem of her skirt revealed teases of her tight, heart-shaped backside. Below that, her slender calves flexed with phenomenal definition on every step.

"So how much time do I have?" she asked while calmly combing both snow and explosive residue from her damp hair with her fingers.

He pulled his eyes back up. "Ah, not much. I said six, which means Karen and Ted will arrive while my clock is still chiming. They're probably parked down the road staring at their watches right now."

"Yes, there was a car waiting around the last curve, thankfully above the avalanche zone. Guess I've got just enough time for a quick shower."

"No need. You look beautiful already. You just need to change."

"Looks can be deceiving," she said with a shake of her head. "I'm covered with some kind of organic acid from that plane. Explosive residue too. I've got to at least wash it off Bo's fur before it burns his skin."

She reached up to undo her scarf as she headed for the bedroom, letting it flutter down to the wooden floor. She winked sexily over her shoulder as she crossed her arms to peel her top off, casually dropping it as well.

Mike eagerly followed her, smiling as he reached down to pick up her discarded uniform bits, only to freeze when he saw the wood floor blackening around her scarf. That necessitated a quick detour to the kitchen to grab some BBQ tongs and rubber gloves. When he got back, her scarf and blue top formed a trail of colorful fabric that ended with her red skirt lying in the curving entrance to my shower room. She was just around the curve and out of sight, but based on the excited barking that came from the shower she wasn't showering alone.

He was suddenly very jealous of his water-loving Lab.

He busied himself picking all the uniform bits and pieces up to walk into the curving shower entrance to toss them under the spray. Bo was shaking his fur under the force of a dozen nozzles that blasted from the ceiling and every wall, even up from the floor. Further around the curve, Anja was leaning back to wash her long hair in the rain shower, her firm boobs pointing up as they defied gravity. Despite everything Mike had learned about her, it still amazed him that she'd absorbed all that punishment at LAX without the slightest mark on her.

Maybe she really was a goddess.

Blinking that misplaced thought away, he took one last look around for her blue panties, only to smile as he remembered her dancing around the house in them last night. She'd dared him to tackle her as hard as he could, and given he used to be a linebacker in college football, he know how to hit.

Given she was wearing her iconic gold choker, she wasn't that much stronger than human, albeit still mostly un-hurttable. And very quick. He tried to tackle her again and again, but she always dodged. Until they were next to the bed, where he threw all his strength into his tackle, hitting her hard enough to carry her halfway across the bed. He landed on top as her long legs wrapped tightly around him to encourage him to take her. Which he eagerly did, with a ferocity that would have broken a lesser woman.

Anja needed sex the way most people need air, the more athletic the better. She had little orgasms on top of big orgasms inside the tsunami of all orgasms that went on endlessly, crying out as her passion soared and plunged like a runaway roller coaster. She was so incredibly sensitive that she made him feel like a superhero.

The free-love movement back in the mid-60's had been the perfect time and place for a teenage Velorian to test her sensual powers. Now, fifty years later, with Jim Morrison and dozens of other rock stars she'd known long dead, and with rock and roll groupies mostly a thing of the past, Anja alone had remained unchanged. Even more amazingly, she was in here in this house with him, the geeky nerd-to-be who was barely out of diapers when she was a sweet sixteen and wandering barefooted down Haight and Ashbury streets with flowers in her hair.

The doorbell rang to interrupt his stoned musings. The rubber gloves went into the trash before he rushed towards the front door, only to have the grandfather clock in the corner start to chime. Smiling at their perfect timing, Mike opened the door on the third chime to find Ted and Karen standing there, covered in snow.

Ted was Mike's age, late fiftyish, and Karen was a few years younger. He's the oral surgeon who keeps the teeth in Mike's head. Karen handles all his real estate deals. They're a comfortable couple, or so Ted had claimed recently. Mike wasn't sure if he meant that as a complaint or an accomplishment.

"Hey, guys, come on in. Welcome to my escape from civilization."

"Screw that," Ted laughed as he waved a couple of bottles. "1984 Silver Oak Cabernet. These'll make your table civilized." He shivered. "Might have to warm it up a bit though."

"How in the hell did you find any of that stuff? I thought it was long gone from this Earth."

"I have teeth in high places," Ted said with a grin.

"Good to see you again, Mike," Karen said with a quick brush of lipstick against my cheek. "Smells good in here. Lasagna again? So, is your little girlfriend here?"

Her strung-together questions made it clear that they'd been talking about both my cooking and Anja.

"Well, whatever my cooking lacks, Karen, I'm sure Ted's wine will make up for. And yes, Anja will be out in a minute."

Karen gave him her 'boys will be boys' look as she turned to head for the kitchen. "Let's see if I can save us from a complete disaster," she said over her shoulder.

"How can she be here already?" Ted whispered urgently as soon as the kitchen door closed. "I mean, I was listening to CNN as we came over the pass. God, I couldn't believe the way she lifted that huge Boeing on her back and flew it out over the ocean. And that explosion. I swear I felt it from here. Was it nuclear?" He suddenly stopped as he heard the shower running in the bedroom. He looked at Mike with an amazed look. "She's in your bedroom? Taking a shower?"

Mike tried not to grin like a Cheshire cat. "Yeah, something about acid and explosive residue or whatever that she needs to wash off. And no, nothing nuclear."

"Still, I hope you've got a hazmat shower."

Ted had literally fallen out of his chair last week when Mike had mentioned that he knew the girl everyone was calling Supergirl. That she was coming to the next dinner party.

"God, I still can't believe you two are together. I mean, what does a girl like that see in a guy..."

"Envy isn't your best trait, Ted," Mike interrupted before Ted could embarrass himself, "and she doesn't call herself that." Bo thankfully interrupted that awkward moment by dashing downstairs to greet Ted, jumping on him while soaking wet. Ted pushing him away while laughing, only to have Bo stand between us to shake wildly. Like all Labs, he loves to share the good times.

"Sorry," Ted said sheepishly as he turned his back to the dog spray. "But this is sort of like finding out that my friend is married to Wonder Woman or something. Some people are claiming she's actually a goddess. Like for real."

"I'm not married to anyone, Ted. And it's Gerry who's married to a goddess. The wondrous and lovely Brigitte."

Ted groaned. "Eye candy and heartburn is what she is. I don't know why Gerry puts up with her." He paused as a funny look lit his eye, and he laughed. "OK, I know why. But how did you meet Anja?"

"On the Net. She and I share something special," Mike said with a shrug, clearly reticent to say more.

"Anja, Anja," Ted said softly, her Swedish name rolling smoothly off his tongue. "A name no one else knows. I can't believe that I'm finally going to meet the fabulous Su-

pergirl. Do you realize that a guy could make a shit load of money by revealing her identity to the media?"

"In which case I'd be screwed because we would have to move halfway across the planet and buy wigs and create new identities. And find new friends."

"Ouch," Ted frowned. "No worries, bro. Just saying. We got your back."

"That's why you can't tell Gerry or any of the wives. Not Mark either. I only trust you two. Nobody, and I mean absolutely no one else knows her real identity. We'd both like to keep it that way."

Ted's eyes sparkled. "Yeah... but how are you going to explain dating a teenager? The experts on CNN claim she can't be over nineteen. I think they're being generous."

"I'm not explaining anything. People can think what they want."

"That's not going to go well, Mike," Ted said with a long exhale. "Helen is going to freak. Probably Karen too. This isn't just a May-December thing. This is January-December. Robbing the cradle. Whatever."

"She doesn't look quite so young when she's wearing her civvies."

"Too bad. I had this vision of her wearing that tiny costume as she tells us about her free-loving days."

Ted has Aspergers Syndrome, but he operates at the highest-functioning end of the autistic spectrum. He lacks some of the filters most people use to keep from saying weird things. It was part of his charm.

"Maybe sometime when its just the three of us, Ted. But this is a dinner party so of course she's not going to wear it. And she calls it a uniform, not a costume. And it's not really clothing. It's alive."

"Alive?! Damn. Sure looks real. I really love that tiny skirt, especially when she's landing and it lifts to show that perfec..." Ted suddenly stopped as one of his filters

belatedly cut in. His face turned red. "I mean, a lot of guy's dream about her," he quickly finished. "Everyone's talking."

"It's cool, Ted," Mike said as graciously as he could. "I'm trying to get used to it all."

"OK... but as far as Gerry and Brigitte go, why do you keep inviting them to these parties, Mike? She's such a total bitch to the other wives and Gerry spends all his time counting his money in front of us. Either that or showing off Brigitte's assets, at least when she's not already flaunting them. What an asshole."

"We go way back. He got me started in this business and he still knows how to make money. In fact, we're working on a deal now. I need the money after Xylander crashed. Besides, you always seem to enjoy the way Brigitte flirts with you."

"Only if you don't mind being a pawn in her little game of seduction. Hanging around Brigitte makes me feel like a sheep dancing with a hungry she-wolf. She's definitely engaging, but her flirting always crosses the line. I get the feeling that one of these nights she's going to leap on me and fuck my brains out when Gerry isn't looking. Or maybe when he is. Equal odds."

Mike nodded, feeling much the same. "Be strong, Ted. Showing weakness in front of Brigitte is just offering yourself up for the slaughter."

"Not only that, but those exclusive one-off gowns of hers must cost more per square inch than gold," Ted added. "It's rude the way she flaunts them in front of our wives."

That reminded Mike that he had no idea what Anja was going to wear. He'd told her about Brigitte and her flaunting, which on reflection probably wasn't a good idea. Velorians are extremely competitive by nature.

The doorbell interrupted his thoughts again. Ted headed toward the dining room to let the wine breathe while Mike trotted back to the front door.

It was Rick and Helen. Rick was a senior design engineer for Tesla who focused on their auto-pilot software. His hair was graying, and there were lines around his eyes from staring too long at computer screens, but he was still in great shape. Helen was petite and pretty in a subdued way. She'd been a flight attendant for many years, and her first marriage had been to a pilot who'd eventually left her for the latest model of cute, young thing. She and Ted had gotten married a couple of years ago.

"Hi, guys, welcome to my little cabin," Mike said as he spotted Helen's son from her first marriage standing behind them, almost hidden by the heavy snowfall. "Hey, come get out of the snow, Kevin. How ya doing'? Still playing football for Cherry Creek?"

"If you call being a trainer playing, then yeah. We were runners-up for State this year."

"Cool. Rick told me you're also on the practice squad. Next year's the one, buddy. You want to play tight-end, right?"

Kevin gave him a reluctant shrug.

"You wouldn't believe the football talent at his school," Rick added. "Most of the team are college ball prospects. Kevin's decided to study sports medicine instead of playing."

"Well, at least your brains won't be scrambled that way," Mike offered as consolation. But he could see in Kevin's eyes that he really wanted to play.

Helen was standing on the wooden bridge across the stream in the middle of my living room, staring up at the half-dozen small waterfalls that fed it. She stretched her arms wide while slowly turning around. "Yeah, I can see how that rock wall and these waterfalls and the stream bubbling across the middle of your living room makes this your little cabin in the woods," she called to me in wonder. "That wall is really just part of the mountain, isn't it?"

"Hope you enjoyed the drive up from the valley," Mike said as he enjoyed Helen's wonder about his new house. Having to cross one's living room on a wooden bridge isn't everyone's ideal, but he'd sunk nearly six million of his dwindling fortune into creating this dream home. The modern glass, wood and stone house hung from the side of a cliff a thousand feet above Blue Reservoir. The idea was to bring the mountain inside, yet with all the comforts of home.

"At least the road up here is finally staying fixed thanks to a neighbor and his dozer. It was dicey getting in last winter."

"Just in time for the avalanches and floods to tear it out again," Rick observed. "One came down when we were halfway up your road, thankfully well away from us. There are drawbacks to living up this high."

"Yeah. I had to snowshoe in for nearly a month last winter."

"Helen wouldn't open her eyes all the way up that so-called road of yours. She has this thing about heights."

"You're afraid of heights?" Mike said, turning to Helen in amazement. "But you worked as cabin crew for United for what, twenty plus years?"

"I was never worried about driving off a snow-packed narrow road that lacks even a guardrail at the edge of a vertical cliff. Planes are safe. Flown by people who know how to fly them."

Like everyone else, she dreaded Rick's driving. He enjoys solving math puzzles in his head while driving to avoid the boredom. Sometimes he gets distracted.

"Then I'd stay away from the back deck. It has a glass floor and it's more than a thousand feet straight down."

Helen shivered as she disappeared into the warm safety of the kitchen's stone floor and Ponderosa pine beams and walls. The kitchen's high, glass sunroof provided

an unfettered view of the sky, but it was securely covered now by the heavy layer of snow.

Mike was starting to enjoy himself. Tonight was his first time hosting this group of old friends in his new house, and as usual, the women were determined to save him from screwing it up. He made a passable three-cheese Lasagna and a decent salad and even baked his own French bread. Not exactly the stuff of formal dinner parties, nor anything resembling gourmet, but living alone in a mountain cabin gave him several excuses for not getting too fancy. Besides, his cooking skills or the lack thereof gave Helen and Karen something to brag about when they held their parties.

"Is she coming?" Rick whispered as soon as Helen disappeared into the kitchen.

"She's already here. Showering. She had kind of a busy day."

"Get out of here!" he said as he punched Mike in the shoulder. "She was still down at LAX a few minutes ago."

"She can get from there to here or anywhere else pretty fast. I think she went around the Moon or something on the way in. You know, to confuse the radar."

"Hey, Rick, good to see you," Ted said as he walked back out of the dining room. "Welcome bro. Been a while. Thought you and Helen were moving back to Florida?"

"We are. Going to try my hand at servo control for autonomous aircraft. But when Mike mentioned this party and just happened to hint that his new girlfriend was going to be here, I figured, what the hell, Florida can wait a week." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "I mean, it isn't everyday that we get to meet a Kryptonian goddess."

"Velorian," Mike corrected, his chest swelling. The doorbell rang again to save him from any stupid-sounding false modesty.

He opened the door to greet Mark and his new wife, Lani. Mark was the senior VP of a high tech company who loved to compete in Iron Man contests. Lani was Balinese, tall and smoothly athletic looking. A Eurasian woman, her eyes were more round

than oval, her irises midnight black. Her mix of Dutch and Balinese ancestries gave her an exotic look, especially given she was wearing a King's ransom of gold jewelry. No one making an engineer's salary could afford such things, but Mark had said something about family heirlooms, which made sense given her Hindu family supposedly had serious money. She had a round, Asian face with long, straight hair so black it seemed to give off an odd purplish highlight. Her body was lean yet surprisingly curvaceous, seemingly carved from smooth, tight muscle except for her breasts, which sat unnaturally high and round. She'd obviously had some work done.

She and Mark were the exercise addicts of the group. Lani had recently joined Mark on the Iron Man circuit, easily winning her first contest. Now they competed as a couple. Mark claimed they were a match made in heaven, their souls and their bodies perfectly paired. They were always touching as they whispered to each other constantly, the two of them sharing secret smiles. Men above a certain age aren't supposed to act silly around women, but Mark didn't care about any of that.

"We damn near got taken out by an avalanche," he exclaimed, his face pale. "I think the bottom of your road is buried now."

"Not to worry. My neighbor down below has a dozer. He'll have it open in a while."

"Yeah, but Gerry and Brigitte were behind us. Hope they're OK."

"I'm sure they are," Mike said confidently. "The main avalanche chute from the box canyon runs beside the road and only the really big slides spill over it. I bought my neighbor a small Caterpillar dozer so he could keep the road open."

"Tell me again how simple it is to have a house in the sky," Rick laughed.

"The girls are in the kitchen," Mike said to Lani as he gently pried her away from Mark long enough to give her a welcoming hug. She was slender, almost delicate looking despite the muscle, but her body felt like a tightly tuned guitar. She held him tightly enough to empty his lungs.

"Wow, some hug," Mike said, gasping for air as she released him.

Lani smiled thinly as she glanced anxiously toward the kitchen.

"Don't worry. Karen and Helen have got everything covered."

Lani rolled her dark eyes. "Gotta do my duty," she said while marching off toward the kitchen.

The older women had treated Lani poorly when she'd arrived at her first group dinner. There was still a definite air of "you don't belong here" in their body language whenever Lani was around. The antipathy seemed instinctual, almost hormonal, at least according to Ted and Rick, who said it wasn't typical of either of their wives.

"Lani's a gutsy girl, I'll give her that. A sleek, muscular dolphin swimming with some circling sharks." Mike instantly regretted characterizing Helen and Karen that way, but Mark just nodded as he stared worriedly after Lani. Mike gripped his shoulder to reassure him. "Don't worry, Karen and Helen will hold their tongues out of respect for you, if for no other reason. Not only that, but Brigitte never tries to intimidate Lani for some reason. Not sure what that's all about."

Mark nodded. "Thank God for small miracles."

The doorbell rang again, interrupting their musings. Speaking of the devil, it was Gerry and Brigitte this time. Gerry was in his mid fifties and had light brown hair, his height just a bit less than six feet with a runner's build. He was tanned and fit from his new sport of Adventure Racing. Brigitte was French, a few inches taller than Gerry, raven-haired, slender and profoundly attractive. Her golden skin was flawless, her figure more athletic than you usually see with models, but it was her face that was shockingly, stunningly beautiful. To no one's surprise, she was a well-known advertising model, something she never let anyone forget. She was also the epitome of an alpha female, and she used her beauty and presence to draw every man's attention her way,

often to the anger of their wives and girlfriends. It was her way of making it perfectly clear where the other women stood in the feminine pecking order.

"Ok, girls in the kitchen, guys on deck for cigars," Mike said as he tried to avoid Brigitte. She would dominate any conversation, and she was infamous for using her charms on her host first.

Brigitte gave him a haughty look as she turned and walked toward the kitchen, the exaggerated sway of her hips and narrow walk suggesting she was on a fashion runway. She had some great curves, that was for sure, but it was those high cheekbones, perfect lips and those large, violet-blue eyes that earned her a living. Mike would never forget the time she'd walked into a restaurant to join Gerry and he for dinner, and everyone in the huge dining room stopped what they were doing or saying to stare at her. That totally stoked Gerry's pride but it embarrassed Mike, being put on display that way.

Chuckling, he pondered the imminent meeting of supermodel and superwoman. With that amusing thought in mind, he grabbed his box of illegally-imported Cuban Monetarists from the humidor and headed toward the back deck. "Follow me, gentlemen."

He led the way through the sliding glass door to the deck before turning back to watch everyone pause in the doorway. The nearly invisible glass of his deck overhung a thousand foot drop. The first six feet of deck was under the roofline and free of snow, which afforded a dizzying view below.

"Don't worry. It's bulletproof. Nearly as strong as steel."

Rick gasped for air as he stared down at the road winding its way upward from so far down there. It took guts for him to take a few slow baby steps on the glass before grabbing the back of a chair. Everyone had butterflies in their stomachs, unable to keep from imagining the glass floor shattering into a million pieces.

"One-thousand, two hundred and eleven feet to be exact. Same as the top of the radio tower on the Empire State Building in New York. Nice view, huh?"

They all looked uncomfortable as they shuffled toward the far side of the large deck where the newly fallen snow thankfully blocked their view down.

"So, I hear you have a new girlfriend, Mike," Gerry said as he leaned nervously against the cold stainless railing. "Very young according to Ted. Who is she?"

Mike shrugged. "Just somebody I met on the Net."

Ted and Rick were grinning. They knew Gerry would take the bait.

"You know those kinds of relationships don't ever work out, Mike," Gerry said wisely. "Every guy claims they're studly, fit, handsome and financially secure. The girls are all cute, sexy, affectionate with weight in proportion to height. But reality can be a lot different than words."

"You're right, Gerry. Anja didn't look anything like I first thought she would. But we've managed."

"You can't expect too much, Mike," Gerry nodded, sounding wise but tone deaf. "I mean, not everyone is lucky enough to have someone like Brigitte. Did you hear that Christian Dior just hired her? She's going to promote their new line of perfumes. Billboards, bus decals, prime-time TV advertising and magazine saturation. Ads all over the Net too. They say Brigitte's the most beautiful woman they've ever worked with and they're going all out with this new product."

Ted groaned audibly. Gerry was showing off his wife again, this time without her even being in the same room. He had this "whoever dies with the best toys wins" concept toward life.

Mike smiled tolerantly as he let Gerry boast. He was obnoxious, but the two of them had launched a company together before selling it to Apple for fifty million. Gerry's money and business sense combined with Mike's engineering expertise. They split

the proceeds equally. Unfortunately, Mike had poured his share into a venture that failed, Xylander Tech, leaving him with only a fraction of his initial investment.

Gerry had been wiser, and Brigitte was part of the reward he'd bought for himself. He claimed to love her, but she treated him with the same affection that people afford a classic car or fine motorcycle. She liked interesting, handsome, comfortable and wealthy men who didn't cramp her style, but who also kept her feet just a bit off the ground. The puddles of life would never wet her pretty feet.

Which made Mike feel more than a little smug about his relationship with Anja. Their enjoyment of each other was unbounded and pure, and they didn't confuse their unusual relationship with the trappings of love. They didn't talk about marriage, commitments or children. Not even exclusivity. Anja just wanted to be with a man who wasn't intimidated by her and who understood the ins and outs of being Velorian. They both knew her genes were far too good to waste on an ordinary guy. Someday she'd want children, and no human was going to be able to help with that. Her invulnerability was absolute, inside and out.

Kevin interrupted Mike's darkening train of thought as he stuck his head out the sliding glass door. "Hey, where's the guest head, Mike," he asked. He looked down at the road so far below before stepping back, eyes wide. "Whooah..."

"Upstairs on the left, second door," Mike pointed absently, still lost in his thoughts.

Kevin trotted off, only to rush back onto the deck moments later, this time without even looking down. He was blushing brightly, his original mission seemingly forgotten.

"You didn't tell me!" Kevin said in an awestruck voice. "That, you know, she's here!!"

Ted took a big puff on his cigar as he winked at Rick.

"Guess the kid just met your new girlfriend, Mike," Gerry said. "Is she cute, Kevin?"

Kevin stared blankly at Gerry for a long moment, unable to find suitable words. He turned back to gesture toward my bedroom, mouth opening and closing without a sound.

Gerry didn't have a clue as he looked blankly into Kevin's blushing face. "So what the hell's the big deal, Kevin? You walk in on her when she was changing or something?"

"Her feet..." he mumbled. "They weren't touching, you know, the fl..."

"What's that about her feet?" Gerry interrupted.

Kevin shook his head. "Not touching..."

"I think your kid's spacing out on us, Rick," Ted said quickly. "Must be the altitude."

Rick silently pulled his finger across his throat to tell Kevin to cool it.

Mike was both amused and concerned. Kevin was now in on Anja's secret and that could be awkward given his age. He stood up to guide Kevin over to a far corner of the deck. The boy was gulping air as he held the railing with a death grip. "This has to remain our secret, Kevin. Just the four of us. Your dad, Ted, you and me. Not Mark or Gerry or any of the women. Can you do that?"

Kevin stared down for a long moment, and then looked up, his eyes glassy and wide. "And if I can't, do you toss me over this railing or something?"

"Not me, but who knows what Anja would do. She'd be seriously pissed, but maybe she'd catch you before you hit. Probably."

He stared at Mike wild-eyed, not sure if he was joking or not. Mike wasn't entirely sure either. He gave him a wink and a nudge to get his feet moving. "But we're not going to have that complication, are we? Come on. Let's go see if the kitchen needs any help." He needed to keep Kevin away from Gerry and his constant prying.

They burst through the kitchen doorway to find Helen frowning at them.

"Oh, honey...!" she exclaimed as she saw Kevin's wild eyes. "You aren't taking drugs again, are you? Mike, are you giving that damnable weed of yours to my kid?"

I saw Kevin's eyes harden as he glared angrily at his mom.

"Actually, Kevin's very well connected with reality, Helen. Too well perhaps at the moment, but not with the one he thought."

Helen gave Mike a frowning glare, angry that he'd done something to upset her son. She didn't question his inscrutable comment about reality. Mike let that thought float in the air while he dug a Coke out of the fridge. "Here, Kevin, this should help."

He sucked it down like an alcoholic with his first drink of the day, all the while staring at Mike with a look of questioning wonder and newfound respect. No longer was he just some boring old friend of his step-dad's.

Mike touched his finger to his lips before turning to walk back out into the living room and up the short flight of stairs, smiling. The door to his bedroom suite was open but the room turned out to be empty. Walking over to the window, he saw Anja standing in the glare of the deck lights, blonde hair blowing in the wind. It was bitterly cold out there, but she was dressed for the tropics. Even worse, she wasn't wearing her brown contacts or wig or any other aspect of the simple disguise she wore around people who didn't know her secrets.

Everyone crowded closely around her. Ted was struggling against the wind to re-light his cigar. Rick was firing questions at her while Gerry seemed to be carefully taking her apart with his eyes, an amazed look on his face. Kevin stood off to the side, looking at her with puppy dog eyes. Mark was off somewhere else with Lani as usual.

Anja looked like an absolute goddess. She was dressed in a long, shimmering silver gown that tapered upward to end in a broad lace choker, leaving her shoulders, arms and back golden and bare the way she liked.

Mike sighed. He'd told her to just be herself tonight, but what he'd meant was her usual hiding-in-plain-sight-with-brown-contacts-and-wig-wearing-conservative-clothing-pretending-to-be-human self. Not her Velorian self. After all her years on Earth, she still misunderstood things like that. Perhaps on purpose.

That's when he saw a flash of sky-blue from under her blonde hair. Shit! She was wearing the huge blue diamond earrings they'd made together.

He'd purchased two baseball-sized pieces of extremely rare petrified coal from a rock collector, and Anja had gripped them with all her strength for an entire weekend, frequently blasting her hands with her laser vision. When she finally opened them, she was holding an amazing pair of blue diamonds, each of them over 30 carats. He sent them to a craft jeweler in New York who was willing to cut them and install them in glistening silver mounts, no questions asked. Anja kept an eye on him to keep him honest. He was insanely proud of their unique handicraft, but anyone who knew high-end jewelry (like Gerry) would instantly realize that flawless blue diamonds of that size were worth far more than his house.

He quickly clambered down the stairs, both confused and worried and a little angry. They'd never talked about a coming out here at the party. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Anja gave him a smoldering smile as he joined her on the deck, her blue eyes sparkling like stars in a perfect sky, the shade perfectly matching her blue diamonds. She was wearing a softly red shade of lipstick, but was otherwise devoid of makeup. Her body was seemingly carved from smooth, sleek muscle, what with breasts that sat unnaturally high and firm, seemingly violating the laws of gravity. The silvery weave of her gown was mesmerizing given a ripple of subtle color signaled every breath or movement, drawing all eyes to the unusual display.

Mike was totally impressed and indescribably proud of her, but also a little overwhelmed and angry about the complications she was going to cause. She was turning it all on tonight.

"So, I see you've already met Anja," he said while putting his arm possessively around her tiny waist. "Anja, let me introduce you to this band of thieves. Ted here is the tooth-scraper who's trying to light his cigar. He's simultaneously a world-class oral surgeon and the worst softball player in California. His wife Karen will sell you a house. Ted, meet Anja Eriksson."

Anja's eyes flashed red for a fraction of a second, and the end of Ted's cigar suddenly blazed. She took the cigar from his hand and took a long draw – her way of saying that she was just one of the guys – and then gave it back. Ted's face looked as if he was undergoing a religious epiphany. He'd seen where that flash of light had come from.

"The guy on Ted's right is Rick," Mike continued. "He's off to Florida to try his hand at making planes fly without pilots. A genius with auto-pilot firmware and the second worst softball player in California. Ted, Rick, his wife Helen and I were once on a mixed-doubles softball team that came in last in the Tahoe city league three years in a row. Nobody has ever done that, before or after us. They gave us a special trophy made of Nerf balls."

Anja giggled. "I could probably help you guys out," she said, winking at Rick. "I've got a wicked fast ball. You guys need a pitcher for next year?"

Rick nodded vigorously as he stared at Anja's strong shoulders, knowing her fast ball would turn to smoke before it got to the poor catcher.

That's when Mark stepped gingerly onto the deck. "Hey guys," he started to say before he looked down and then up at Anja. His eyes grew wide.

"And this here is Mark, Anja. He's VP of Engineering for a network startup outfit, although he spends half his life in the Far East launching products into manufacturing. His wife is from Bali. A very nice girl, you'll like Lani."

Anja reached out to take his offered hand. "Glad to meet you, Mark. Mike's told me a lot about you. You still go to that bar in Phuket where that girl does that amazing thing with that whiskey bottle?"

He blushed. "Ah, no, I mean, not since Lani and I met."

"And lastly," Mike continued, enjoying himself immensely, "we have Gerry. He's a venture capitalist, the kind of pirate that hands out millions and expects billions back. His lovely wife Brigitte is going to be Christian Dior's new face next season."

Gerry continued to stare intently at Anja. "I know I've seen your face before. Do you model?"

Anja shook her head as she laughed softly. "Hardly. I work for an aerospace firm doing testing out in the desert at Edwards. Hypersonic aircraft. I'm interning with Lockheed Martin's scramjet propulsion team."

The look in Gerry's face said that was the last thing he'd expected. His practiced eye traveled slowly up and down her body again, seemingly undressing her. "You should consider modeling, Anja. You're absolutely perfect. I've got some contacts in the business and I could..."

"Ok, everyone," Helen's voice thankfully interrupted from the kitchen doorway. "Places, please. Dinner is serv..." She paused in mid-word when she spotted Anja. Wiping her hands on her apron, she walked out into the cold air to meet her, the two of them sharing a polite hug and a brief welcome. Helen turned to glare at Mike as she headed back toward the warm kitchen, accusation clear in her eyes. Ouch. It was starting.

Mike encouraged Anja to follow Helen into the house to meet Brigitte and Karen in private. If this was going to get snarky, better there than at the dinner table.

Ted and Rick headed toward the dining room, leaving Gerry alone with Mike on the deck.

"You're drooling, Gerry. It's embarrassing."

"Ok, what the fuck is going on, Mike. You said girlfriend. OK, I got the girl part."

"It's not what it looks like," Mike replied, feeling a little defensive. "Anja's older than she looks."

"Bullshit. If she's old enough to buy a drink I'll eat my shirt. But forgetting that, I see a girl who could turn the modeling world on its ear. I've never seen anyone with such perfect golden skin tones as hers, and she's not even wearing makeup. And those pale blue eyes. I swear they give off more light than they take in. And that figure! She's obviously had a lot of expensive work done."

Mike puffed calmly on my cigar. "No scalpel has ever creased her skin, Gerry."

"Bullshit. And double bullshit if you're actually trying to tell me you and she actually have a thing?" he blurted out. "I mean, why you?" He paused. "She could have any... I mean..."

"Anyone she wants?" Mike finished for him. "Glad to see some things don't change, Gerry. You still wear your heart on your sleeve, or your id at least. Has it ever occurred to you that Anja and I might share something special? Oh, and perhaps to say something nice for once. Like maybe, 'congratulations'."

Gerry blinked his eyes as if Mike had asked him to perform an unnatural act. "Mike, I'm telling you, that girl is trouble," his voice was low and serious now. "I've been with Brigitte long enough to meet many of the other supermodels. Trust me, most of them couldn't stand in the same room as Anja. She's going to figure that out and she'll be gone." He shook his head while sagging backward to lean heavily

against the railing. "I don't fucking understand this. I mean, not you..." his voice trailed off. "You're as old as I am."

"And Brigitte isn't as young as Anja, is that what you're saying? She's what, twenty-nine? Forever."

Gerry frowned. "Twenty-eight. Besides, I'm supposed to get all the hot girls and the fast cars while you make the business work." His voice started to grow angry now. "We had a deal."

"We never had a fucking deal like that. That's just your image of yourself and your expectation of me, Gerry. You've got Brigitte, Ms. Sexuality-Expressed or whatever that ad campaign was about last year. The beautiful she-wolf. Anja's different. She's very sweet."

Gerry laughed as he took a long puff on his cigar. "Don't be so sure of that. Girls like her get ambitious. And it's not so bad for me. Christian Dior pays very well for its top model. And Brigitte's astoundingly good in bed. Beyond amazing."

"That's more than I needed to know, Gerry. And it's always the money first with you, isn't it? Or is it the sex? I get confused."

Gerry puffed on his cigar. "Yeah, sure, what else is there? The two pillars of a successful life."

"What else? A whole world, Gerry. A world full of people who care about each other. People who don't choose their friends based on money or genes."

"Love, huh? Tell me that what you feel for that little lynx is love and not just fucking rut lust and I'll call you a liar."

"I didn't say we were in love. But we enjoy each other's company. She's like this beautiful butterfly fluttering through my life. I have no idea how long she'll stay, or even how I, of all the men on Earth, deserve her attentions, but I'm not going to shove her away just because she's young and beautiful."

He wanted so much to tell Gerry the rest of Anja's story, but he couldn't handle it. Gerry had never been known to keep a secret.

Gerry stared at Mike for a long moment before chuckling. "Well, congrats. She's a fucking goddess, Mike. But way too hot for the likes of you. Someone is going to steal her away."

Mike just laughed at his friend's arrogance, knowing that in his twisted way Gerry was actually concerned about him. "Hey, if she meets a guy she wants to be with more than me, then sure, I'd give her my blessing. I might even stand up to give her away at her wedding. But until then, she's looking for some rather unusual traits in a man."

"Which is why you should worry. Every jock and swinging dick on the planet is going to be hitting on her. Men with private jets and gold toilets and golf courses and high-rise towers and more money than God."

"Yeah, well, a whole bunch of guys hit on her an hour or so ago. She wasn't very impressed."

Gerry turned to look at Mike as if he was deranged.

So far, so good. He was confirming one of Mike's theories – that Anja's red and blue uniform and being able to fly and all the superhuman rest of her blinded everyone to the girl beneath. He called it the 'goddess syndrome'. As in, nobody expects to meet an actual goddess while walking down the street. Or while having dinner at a friend's house.

"Actually, I wasn't even looking for anyone when I met her. She wrote an email to me through this web page I contribute to. She and I share something. And not just what you're thinking."

Gerry snorted. "Bullshit, buddy. I know what you guys share. Your money. Her body. I read one of your fantastic stories. She probably wears some little costume to bed and..."

Mike turned his back to Gerry while stubbing out his cigar. "I guess you'd know about costumes, Gerry. Everything Brigitte owns is some kind of costume. And as far as the money goes, I thought you said you were supposed to have all of that."

He walked inside, leaving Gerry standing on the snowy deck.

Anja's pale eyes were radiating their special light when he entered the softly-lit dining room. One of her favorite *Doors* songs was playing in the background. He would have preferred something a bit jazzy and mellow like *Norah Jones*. She sat on the far side of the table, the shifting colors of her gown dazzling in the warm light. Brigitte sat directly across from her, her eyes sending daggers Anja's way. Helen and Karen were carrying things from the kitchen with potholders, both of them trying not to notice the building tension. Clearly the conversation had gotten snarky in the kitchen.

Karen leaned over to whisper something in Anja's ear.

Whatever she said, it made Anja laugh. Mike so loved to hear her laugh, the sound like a crystalline waterfall. That and the way her eyes lit up when she smiled. His heart did its usual flip-flop as she brushed some blonde strands from those amazing dimples. He walked around the table to sit next to her, suddenly very conscious of his age given Gerry's comments. Her hand found his beneath the table to give him a reassuring squeeze.

"The alpha wolf has begun her attack," she whispered in his ear. *"Now the fun begins."*

Brigitte's eyes moved from Mike's face to Anja's and back, looking doubtful, even a bit confused. There was no arguing that they were a very odd couple.

"I thought you said Brigitte was almost young enough to be Gerry's daughter?" Anja whispered to him, her voice carefully calibrated to be just loud enough for Brigitte to hear. *"She's much older than that."*

Brigitte's left eyebrow rose and her lips tightened. Mike tried not to laugh. To his surprise, it was Anja who'd fired the opening verbal salvo at the dinner table.

"And I had no idea you were such a child, Anja," Brigitte said loudly in that superior voice of hers. "When do you graduate? From high school, right?"

"Actually, I'm in the graduate Aerospace Engineering program at CalTech," Anja replied casually. "I'm just fortunate to not age as quickly as some women."

Brigitte glared at Mike, eyes piercing him with their violet-blue intensity, the word "bullshit" on her lips. His heart began to beat funny. Anja was messing with Brigitte's head, and messing with heads was Brigitte's speciality. Were they looking at mutually-assured destruction over dinner?

Ted raised his glass as Karen and Helen finally sat down. He reached behind me to adjust the lighting further downward.

"Ok, the first toast of the night is mine," he said. "Especially since the last dinner was at our place. I want to thank Mike for dragging us all the way up here from the valley, across a mountain pass and up a near vertical shelf road with a monster snowstorm notwithstanding."

"Don't forget the avalanche," Gerry said.

Ted continued. "Good company and good food are the twin pillars of life, and worth a little risk to get to."

A clink of glasses and a murmur of assent followed.

Rick lifted his glass to give the second toast. "And here's to Mike's lovely companion, Anja, who truly is an angel. Welcome to our little tribe."

Anja rose smoothly to her feet, every eye following her. Mike blinked as he realized her gown had become almost transparent in the low light. The men stared as if they were caught in the throes of a religious experience. The women's looks ranged

from anger to a strange smirk on Lani's face. He started to reach for the dimmer to turn the lights back up, but Anja's hand found his first.

"The lighting will be just fine for the moment, Mike," she whispered in his ear.

He felt the blood rushing from his head. Anja was in one of her moods tonight. She knew exactly what the lights had done to her gown. But then, nudity had never embarrassed her. Far from it, it turned her on. Especially when she had an appreciative audience.

"I want to thank you all for coming to our home tonight," she said, emphasizing "our". Her voice was Velorian smooth, yet with an accent that suggested Swedish gutturals beneath a Parisian lilt. "I've been so looking forward to meeting you all, especially after Mike told me so much about you. It's so wonderful to put faces to stories, and to have such good friends, both young and old."

Anja leaned over to touch her glass to everyone else's, and then sat back down, her posture ramrod straight.

Brigitte's eyes narrowed further.

"To beauty and power," Rick said as he seconded her toast, his eyes never leaving Anja.

Kevin raised a wine glass he shouldn't even have given his age and waved it around in a silent toast, his mouth full of something. It was lost on no one that he appeared to be the closest to Anja's age.

"To extreme power and ultimate beauty," Ted added as the power of speech returned to him.

Karen and Helen appeared puzzled by their husband's strange toasts, clearly wondering how power came into this? Lani watched silently from her corner seat, a superior little smile on her face.

Gerry couldn't take his eyes from Anja, not even when Brigitte slowly rose to her feet. Obviously this was going to be a night for the women to stand while giving toasts.

Brigitte's tightly-tailored, ultra-expensive dress also shimmered in the low light, the swell of her generous breasts nearly escaping the deep cut of her top, her luminous violet-blue eyes making her look hauntingly beautiful. She took a deep breath that managed to tear a few eyes away from Anja.

"To youth, and to the truly young at heart," Brigitte said as she nodded toward Kevin. She turned to glare at me. "And to the foolish pursuits of older and supposedly wiser men." Then to Anja, eyes narrowing. "And the golden aspirations of pretty, ambitious girls."

No one moved as Brigitte's arrogant and insulting toast quieted the room. Lani giggled. Mike waited for ten heartbeats before he rose to defuse the tension. Keeping the peace was the host's role.

"And here's to Christian Dior's latest and most beautiful model, Brigitte Girand. May we see your face on a million posters and a thousand buses, Brigitte."

Brigitte smiled her usual thanks as a sigh of relief washed around the table. The pecking order had been restored. Everyone enthusiastically clinked glasses again and started talking as Brigitte sat down.

Anja leaned close to whisper. *"Is she really that much of a bitch? I can't believe that toast."*

"She's a model, Anja," Mike whispered back. *"She lives on and for her looks. Period. She's also scared. For perhaps the first time in her life, she's in a room with a woman she can't hold a candle to."* He kissed her earlobe gently as he whispered: *"You Velorians have a very powerful impact on mere humans. And not just on us guys."*

Anja continued to glare at Brigitte as he held her hand tighter, hoping she wasn't going to do something embarrassing. He leaned back over to whisper in her ear again. *"Brigitte just doesn't know how to deal with you, honey, so be nice to her."*

Anja laughed softly. *"I'm sorry, Mike, but there are some things that a Velorian just has to do. Brigitte's arrogance is not becoming. I have a few pegs to remove to get her feet back on the ground."*

Mike squeezed her hand while shaking his head. *"Not tonight. Please."*

Anja sighed as she slumped in her chair.

Dinner proceeded as per normal, which meant Brigitte talking about her favorite person – herself. Nothing new there. Anja tried to say as little as possible, but Rick kept babbling on about the incident at LAX, his oblique questions more and more directed at Anja. She played the game by answering them with no more insight than if she'd watched the story on TV along with the rest of us.

Mike tried to change the subject by talking about the recent election. That bombed. Everyone wanted to talk about Anja, who demurred at first. She finally gave in and began to describe how she'd grown up in Sundsvall, Sweden, how she'd moved to the US to attend college at Stanford and then CalTech and now to this engineering internship. How she lived with her twin sister in LA.

She paused there as planned. She didn't understand why it was such a big deal, but Mike had convinced her that given the way male imaginations work, every man would be trying to visualize twin versions of Anja standing in front of them. Which was all by plan, given everything except CalTech and the internship had come straight from Mike's imagination.

She continued on, describing how she liked to row racing sculls, which explained her strong back. But most of all, she said she loved to sky dive. That and working as a big sister for an orphaned girl in LA.

“Don’t you ever worry about your chute not opening?” Helen asked, being as practical as usual. She’d gotten stuck on the skydiving, worrier that she was. “I know that’s all I would think of.”

Anja shook her head. “Nope. Never.”

Those who knew Anja’s real story tried to keep a straight face. What she meant by skydiving was burning through the atmosphere at hypersonic speeds.

Rick shifted the discussion to talk about who was going to host the next dinner. That was usually an animated topic, but tonight, despite draining those two bottles of excellent Silver Oak, the tension remained high between Brigitte and Anja. Brigitte was running at full throttle as she fired shots toward Anja that were artfully veiled in velvet. Anja gave them back in kind, everything so polite on the surface.

Strangely, the more the tension grew, the more affectionate Anja became, which given her apparent age, made everyone else uncomfortable. This was another Velorian strangeness – stress makes them horny; combat even more so. Her touches, her kisses, her whispered words in Mike’s ear, her hand teasing him beneath the table. There was no false modesty on her part. Between her perfect body and her invulnerability and her many other gifts, she was completely confident of her place in the pecking order. Which drove Brigitte crazy given she’d always claimed that pinnacle. Yet Brigitte was holding back a bit tonight, playing a different game. It was like she sensed something about Anja that only a few of us knew.

Mike defused things by moving the party from the dining table to the living room where he poured brandies. Thankfully the conversation shifted to movies for a while, then the Academy Awards. Ted wanted to talk about the recent terrorist attacks before Mike diverted that dangerous discussion by asking about Karen’s latest passion: snowboarding. Despite being mid fiftyish, she'd taken up a sport where the average age of the participants was seventeen. He thought it was charming the way her eyes danced

when she talked about boarding. Everyone needed a passion to keep them young, he claimed, and Karen had definitely found hers.

Mike's passion was sitting next to him on the couch, casually sipping on her brandy as her hand slowly brushed across his lap once, twice and then stayed. He wasn't exactly in one of his more relaxed states as it was, and the touch of her hand in full view of everyone was enough to make him swallow a few drops of fiery liquid the wrong way. He started coughing as Anja pounded on his back until he drank the rest of his brandy in a single gulp. Fire fought fire as he gasped until he was able to breath again. He fought for control by remembering that those gentle fingers of hers could easily crush steel.

That only made it worse. Realizing she was crossing the line, Anja rose to head into the kitchen, looking back to give Mike a smoldering come-hither look.

Brigitte kept staring at Mike. "Teenagers can be impetuous, can't they? Hard to keep up. Pretty obvious who's in charge here."

Mike felt like a pawn trapped between a couple of Princesses, and playing the pawn wasn't his thing. He grabbed Anja's mostly full glass of brandy and downed it in one gulp, hoping the fire would distract the rest of him. Unfortunately, that gave Gerry the moment he needed to follow Anja into the kitchen. Brigitte turned to glare angrily at her husband's back.

Lani and Mark took advantage of the distraction to slip away.

Mike excused himself to walk stiffly out onto the deck, claiming he needed some cold air. No one was going to argue with that. Once there, he worked his way across the snowy deck in the darkness to stand near the partially open kitchen window. Knowing Gerry, their discussion was going to be amusing.

"I know I've seen you somewhere," Gerry was telling Anja. "You said you didn't model, but I definitely know you. Maybe you can't tell anyone else, but this charade has gone on long enough."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Anja said innocently as she turned to face Gerry. "I'm sure I'd remember if we'd met before." Her pose was elegant yet relaxed.

"No, I've seen you somewhere." He stepped closer to her. "Do you have any idea how much you could make by simply standing in front of a camera looking like you are right now. Yet you work with a bunch of geeky engineers and hang around with guys more than twice your age."

Anja shrugged. "Geeky is a stereotype, and Mike and I have a lot in common. Mainly a desire for a woman to be all she can be. Me."

Gerry laughed. This was familiar territory. "You are something else, Anja." His hand rose to cover hers. "If you think Mike is doing that, you're wrong. He's selfishly hiding you up here in the snow. I know some people in Paris and New York who could change your whole life. Resorts, cars, money, the dazzle of jet-setting around the world, fame. Millions of followers on Facebook. You name it, I could make it yours."

"And what would you get in return, Gerry?"

"Well, Brigitte and I... we don't exactly see things the same way anymore. She's so..."

"Shallow?" Anja finished for him. "Superficial?"

"I was going to say arrogant. But yeah, that too. In some ways, I feel sorry for her. Her beauty is her only possession in the world. And that's going to fade eventually."

"That makes her dangerous, Gerry. Humans like her don't fade gracefully."

"Humans...?" Gerry asked. "What are you talking about?"

Anja glanced down and said nothing.

"You're a little odd, Anja, but I think you understand everything, don't you? You know I'm just a convenience for Brigitte. She has no more ability to love me than she does to be civil to other people."

"So, is that why you can't take your eyes off of me?" Anja asked, staring directly into his eyes.

"I could help you so much, Anja. I could complete your life. I know people, I have power, I have..."

Anja laughed as she interrupted him. "And what makes you think I need any of that?"

"Just look at you. You're hanging out with a guy who thinks its fun to take long walks at sunset, smoking a joint for God's sake. Who climbs mountains just to see the view. Who hangs out on deserted beaches in the South Pacific for weeks at a time. Who sits in this strange house away from everyone and writes books."

"I happen to like sunsets, Gerry. And beaches. I also think some of his fiction is inspired."

Gerry stepped closer, his hand rising to rest on her bare shoulder. "You could watch your sunsets from the top of the Eiffel Tower, or from a porch of your own mansion in Monaco, or from the pool of a yacht in the Med. A condo in Bali."

Anja nodded meaningfully as she turned to stare into his eyes from inches away. "And all I have to do to enrich my life this way is to sleep with you. To replace Brigitte in your bed. Is that how it works?"

His fingers traced gently down her bare arm. "I didn't say that. But I..."

"I'd like to show you something before you embarrass yourself further," Anja interrupted.

"I can see everything I need to already," Gerry said softly. "I've never seen such absolute perf..."

"Tell me," Anja interrupted again as she took a step backward. "Is this the approach that worked with Brigitte all those years ago? What was she, nineteen when you met her? Still going to college, modeling on the side, her ambition far bigger than her Montreal upbringing. Yes, Montreal not Paris as she claims. A woman we both know is really in love with Colette. Her cousin."

"How could you know any of that," Gerry sputtered, his eyes narrowing. He suddenly looked angry. "Mike. He told you about her!"

"Mike and I have no secrets, but I discovered this on my own. So, why do you even stay married to her? I mean, she doesn't even like men. It's all an act, a game for her."

Gerry sagged against the counter. "Jesus. I had no idea that anyone knew." He took a deep breath, his neck coloring from his obvious embarrassment. "Look, we have an arrangement. I help her career, and she helps me."

"You mean helps your image," Anja said. "It's important to you that you're married to one of the most beautiful women on Earth."

"It's not that simple. I do love her in my own way," Gerry argued softly.

"So why are you hitting on me?"

Gerry sighed. "I just want to help you in ways Mike can't."

"Brigitte doesn't love you, Gerry. As I hear it, she goes so far as to invite her cousin into your bed, if only to show you how much she enjoys her. That's a little twisted, Gerry. And very sad."

"Mike doesn't know any of that," Gerry gasped. "How could you... you've been spying on me!"

She shrugged. "Once Mike told me who you were, I did a little checking up on you."

"At least you like men, Anja. I can see it in the way you touch Mike. The way you seem to glow when he touches you." He stepped closer to her, drawn even more to

her now that she knew his secrets. "But I could offer you so much more than him. More of everything. Absolutely everything." His hand rose to brush her cheek as he pressed her gently backward against the stove.

She quickly slid out from the stove, taking Gerry's hand in hers. "Let me show you something first," she said as she led him out the door into the living room.

Standing out on the deck, Mike found he was more angry than amused by their discussion. He came back in from the deck to watch the two of them as they disappeared deeper into the house. Gerry's betrayal didn't surprise him – he was being true to character – but he was embarrassed enough by his eavesdropping that he wasn't going to confront Gerry. At one level Gerry probably believed he was doing Anja a favor. Even more, that he was saving Mike from embarrassing himself with her. To his way of thinking, she was just using Mike until she found a more useful lover. But mostly he was thinking of himself, as usual.

Mike glanced across the room to see Rick and Ted watching the Falcons/Green Bay playoff game on TV. Helen and Karen were chatting happily away as they cleared the table to load up my two dishwashers. Comfortable couples indeed.

Lani and Mark came upstairs after a quick swim in the indoor pool, the two of them looking shiny, sleek and fit.

"I'm going to show Gerry the gym," Anja announced cheerfully as she gave Mike a pointed glance. "Why don't you show Brigitte around the rest of the house." She gestured upward with her eyes. Before he could answer, she literally dragged Gerry down the lower stairs.

"This is such a, ah, unique little house," Brigitte cooed as her eyes glared more daggers at her husband's back. She turned to level her violet eyes on Mike. "So why don't we start with the upstairs?"

"Unique? Most people prefer the word eccentric."

"Oh, that too," Brigitte nodded as she led the way up the steps, "but I expected that. That's one good thing about you, Mike. Your houses are never ordinary. Actually, nothing about you is. Ordinary is the worst kind of boring."

Mike couldn't believe she was hitting on him now. One thing was for sure: Gerry and Brigitte deserved each other.

He stole a quick glance back into the living room to notice that Lani was staring in the direction that Anja and Gerry had gone. Mark's arm was wrapped around her as usual, but this time Lani had the strangest look in her eyes, almost as if she was looking through the far wall. He chalked it up to her blend of Asian and European genes – her expressions were often both inscrutable and strange. Then, just before he moved out of sight, he saw her turn to look at Brigitte. They shared a barely perceptible nod.

Brigitte hooked her arm through Mike's as she insisted on her tour, dragging him up the stairs with surprising strength. He hung back, far more interested in what Anja was going to show Gerry. But she'd made it clear she wanted him up here. So he went along with it all to start the tour with the guest bedrooms. Then his library and writing room, located by itself up on the third story. The glass walls and ceiling provided an uninterrupted view of mountains and sky with the electronic tinting on each pane of glass managing the sun. This was by far his favorite room.

From there they descended a spiral staircase to the master suite. Brigitte gasped like everyone else does when she walked into the room, which, like the deck, hung over the side of the house. The walls and floor were transparent glass while the huge bed was made of gigantic wooden beams. He walked past the bed to look straight down at the silver thread of highway a thousand plus feet below to see that his neighbor was out with the Caterpillar, pushing away the snow from the avalanche. He turned back to face Brigitte, and was only half surprised to see her turning the lock on the door. He began to wonder if she was more partial to men than Anja thought.

"Your girlfriend is very beautiful, Mike. But she looks way too young for the likes of you."

"Way off, Brigitte. She's..."

"Sixty-eight," Brigitte said flatly. "Velorians age very slowly."

"How... how could you know that? I mean, nobody knows about... **gaahrag!**"

Brigitte choked off his last words by grabbing his shirt and jerking him from the floor, her model-slim arm flexing with astounding definition. "Do you really think the Empire would ignore the opportunity to discover the Protector of Earth? Given your writing and the web pages you contribute to, it was only a matter of time before the Protector would become curious and contact you. We've been watching you, influencing your dreams, preparing for this day."

Terror filled him as Brigitte threw him across the room like he was a rag doll. He landed in the middle of his oversized bed to nearly bounce back out of it. She leaped across the room to land on top to pin him down, her thighs straddling his hips to hold him painfully tight.

"So, how far has the mutagenesis gotten, Mike?" she asked while poking her finger painfully into his chest. "That was an amazing display down in the living room. Obviously the Velorian has been working her wonders on you."

He stared up at her, both astonished and terrified. She knew everything!

She dug her fingernail harder into his chest, and he gasped in pain. She lifted her finger to lick the blood off her nail. "You're not cooked nearly enough," she said disgustedly. "Still a Frail. But to hell with it. It's been too damn long since I've been around a real man."

She was underestimating him, for he possessed several times his former strength now, and he'd always been a very strong man. He strained with all his strength to push her off him, but Brigitte gripped him tighter with her slender legs, the extreme pres-

sure making him gasp as he feared she was going to crush his pelvis. He stopped fighting to save himself.

“Good. You’re not stupid. So lets start with your most important enhancement,” she said as she started fumbling with his belt. “With those ever fucking Velorians, that part of a man is always ahead of the rest.”

He grabbed her wrist with both hands as he tried to hold her back, both of his hard-muscled arms opposing her slender one. He’d never been overpowered by a woman before, not even Anja, who was always respectful. Brigitte ignored hi protests as she continued to tear his pants open, her fingers closing tightly around his erection as his body betrayed him again, blood surging as he grew hard in her hand. Angry and scared and now terribly aroused despite himself, he managed to pull his leg up to kick her in the stomach with all he had. Then with both legs. His enhanced strength was barely enough to force her back as he painfully tore himself free of her.

Clearly she was a Betan and not a Prime. That gave him hope. Not that he could overpower her, but that Anja could easily deal with her.

Brigitte just laughed as she forced him back down to straddle him again, her one hand holding both his wrists over his head with an iron grip. She brushed her breasts across his face, using his nose to tear her gown open before burying his face in her warm cleavage, her other hand in his pants again. Mike tried to buck her off, but she used her raw strength to hold him down.

“Quit being such a fucking Frail!” she hissed in his ear.

Frail. A word Mike thought he’d made up, along with a lot of the other stuff about Arions. But what was it that she’d said about influencing his dreams? He’d always gotten most of his ideas from dreams. He thought of Toomey's cryptoalien brainwaves. All of Sharon's stuff? Shadar and Brantley's stories, too? All implanted by the Arions? All apparent fantasies, but in fact based on reality? On implanted dreams?

"Impossible!" he groaned out loud.

"Do you want to live, Mike?" Brigitte whispered softly in his ear as she leaned down to trace her tongue around the rim. Her soft kisses were followed by a sharp bite on his earlobe, and that spike of intimate pain sent a wild surge of desire racing through his body, briefly overcoming his anger and fear.

"When Anja finds out who you are, she'll kill you!" he nearly screamed, struggling for he was worth to push back the wild desires as her pheromones mingled with his blood as her tongue salved the wound on his earlobe. He gasped for air, which only made it worse given he was inhaling her natural perfume, laden as it was with more alien pheromones.

Brigitte just laughed as she felt his body responding to her. "I'm sure she would if she could. But my job is merely to keep you out of the way for a while. There is another."

A lance of cold fear ran through Mike. Lani! Why hadn't he recognized the meaning of all the gold she was wearing? That and her over-the-top muscle tone and those amazingly large eyes and that purplish-black hair. He'd chalked the gold up to the usual affectation of wealthy Balinese Hindus, all of whom seemed to drip with it, and her black eyes had fooled him the same way Anja's brown contacts did to others. After all the stories he'd written about Primes, he should have recognized the truth. A nauseating sense of unreality washed over him. Those things had all come from his dreams. Fantasies. He'd made them up. But he should have known better after Anja revealed herself, especially after she insisted that the Arions were behind these new terror attacks. But to suspect his closest friends? It was the same thinking that blinded his friends to Anja's true identity. Except for Brigitte.

The horror of her plans filled him with despair. He realized now how corrosive Arions were around humans. How they could subvert entire worlds and neutralize the Velorians without large-scale warfare.

"Stop struggling before I have to break you, Mike. Your body knows what to do. After all, you are a bit like me now. We have the same needs."

"I'm nothing like you!" he grunted as he strained against her slender arms. He had to warn Anja, who was completely unprepared to fight an Arion. Her guard would be down here in this house, thinking she was safe among his friends.

His friends. The words echoed in his head. Brigitte had arrived on the scene a year after he'd helped Sharon start publishing the AU, and Lani had married Mark barely a year ago. The sick realization washed over him even stronger now. This had all been arranged by the Arion leadership. And he'd invited them into his house to have a Velorian for dinner!

He tore at Brigitte with renewed strength, but she just laughed, her desires as naked as her chest. Desperate now, Mike tried to yell a warning to Anja, hoping her sensitive ears would hear him, but Brigitte planted her hand tightly over his mouth.

"This doesn't have to end badly for you, Mike. I might even keep you as a pet if you please me." She buried his face in her firm breast, filling his mouth with her softness to shut him up. "A fully enhanced Terran is extremely valuable given very few have the genes for it. I can make things very pleasant for you. For both of us. I can protect you."

He bit down to savage her nipple with all his strength, but she merely gasped in pleasure, arching her body backward to lift her pelvis, her nipple stiffening to rubbery steel between his teeth. She lowered herself over him while guiding him with her hand, squeezing the base of his erection to make him harder yet. Then she plunged down on him, almost breaking his erection in half before her body finally yielded to

take all of him in one long slide as she went crazy on him, rocking and lifting and plunging, fucking him so violently that the massive beams of his bed began to crack. Her silky hair lashed his face as her cries of pleasure filled the room. She bounced faster and faster, her body gradually turning to steel as she raced toward her climax, that silky steel surrounding him tightly enough to have crushed an ordinary man, her inner muscles vibrating so intensely that his teeth chattered and his vision blurred. But instead of injury, a bomb seemed to go off inside him to release an unimaginable surge of desire mixed with black hatred and an overwhelming surge of strength. He suddenly wanted nothing more than to attack her in the way of an Arion, to kill her if he could during sex. All thought of Anja and her danger were erased by a white-hot fury.

Brigitte cried with pleasure as he became the attacker now, thrusting himself into her with such fury that he smashed her head into the thick headboard, cracking the hard oak. She screamed for him to take her harder yet, urging him on as the insanity took him. His only thought was to violently fuck her to death as the Arion berserker fury washed everything else away.

Mike woke to find himself lying among the broken remains of his bed. Brigitte was wrapped around him, silent and limp. The lingering memory of his berserk passion terrified him, even as a dark part of him prayed he'd killed her. But no, she was merely sleeping, a smile on her beautiful face. He grew horrified by the memory of his insane burst of desire, the way it had become a kind of black hatred that had driven him to try and kill her during sex. This was all her fault. Her perverted Arion pheromones had triggered the growing mutations inside him. He'd never felt anything like this kind of dark bloodlust with Anja. This was the Arion dark-side. The basis for their long-running war and mutual hatred.

He tried to pull out of her so he could run for his life, but she held him too tightly to withdraw. Was her natural muscle tone that extreme? Anja had always worn her gold choker in bed, leaving her stronger than him but nothing like Brigitte. Unfortunately gold didn't work on Betans, or so he remembered once writing. A sick feeling came over him as reality and dreams conflicted with logic and waking memories, leaving his thoughts confused, his reality matrix fractured, no longer sure what was real.

He came back to reality as he heard voices, He turned to look up at the three security monitors on the wall. One showed the living room, the other two the private gyms. Thankfully the audio was turned up just enough to pick up several conversations.

"Mark, why don't we go downstairs and work out," Lani was saying as they stood in the living room. Her accent was delightfully musical and Balinese. She took Mark's hand in hers as she led him to the stairs. The look in both their eyes was truly that of lovers. That wasn't what Mike had expected of an Arion, least of all a Prime. Was he wrong about her?

He struggled to push Brigitte sleeping body to the side, still unable to extract himself from her. On the second screen, Gerry was staring at the weight machines in his gym. *"Obviously this is set up for Mike,"* he said to Anja. *Way too heavy. Where do you work out?"*

"Why do you think I work out at all?" Anja asked innocently as she turned to face him. She was leaning against the treadmill.

Gerry laughed. *"Are you kidding? With your body, you gotta live in the gym."*

Anja deliberately gave him a confused look.

"Oh, come on. I've never seen anyone as tight as you," he continued. *"Except maybe Lani, and Mark says she works out half of every day."*

"Well, yeah, I do workout a little," Anja admitted, her voice deliberately coy. *"But not here. This is Mike's room. My room is through that door."* She pointed at the reinforced steel door on the far side of the gym.

Mike suddenly realized with a shock that she was going to reveal who she was to Gerry. He tried to yell, only to have Brigitte's mouth close tightly over his. She was back. He pulled her silky hair from his face, briefly noting that it was as uniquely soft as Anja's. She sat up to start rocking gently in his lap.

"The lighter stuff is in there, huh? Let me see." Gerry walked across the room to grab the huge handle. He couldn't budge it. *"It's locked."*

Anja walked over to place her hand next to his and effortlessly pushed the handle down. The heavy locking dogs withdrew as the thick door gave off a dull metallic BOOM. A puff of misty air came through the crack around the door.

"It isn't a lock. Just a very stiff handle," she said innocently.

A motor smoothly opened the door as Gerry froze in the doorway, staring dumbfounded into a huge, brightly lit cavern that stretched off for two hundred meters, its width half of its length. Big enough to hold four football fields. The entrance sloped down to a flat floor with a thirty meter high ceiling. The room was filled with massive blocks of polished steel, the smallest the size of a car.

"What the hell..." he said as he turned around to look back at Anja.

She walked past him to head down the ramp, pausing halfway to look back up at Gerry. *"I thought you'd have guessed by now, Gerry. Who I am. You said you have an eye for faces."*

She turned back to continue down the ramp, finally pausing next to a glistening block of stainless steel the size of a delivery van. She placed one hand against the steel, her fingers outstretched, her eyes turning back to meet Gerry's. *"But I'll give you three clues. Here's the first one."*

The mirror-bright surface of the block began to distort as she slowly buried her fingers into the steel to their roots. Then, with a flex of impossibly defined muscle, she straight-armed the fifty-ton block off the floor. She just stood there, huge block suspended with one arm, her other hand resting casually on her hip.

Gerry stared, eyes bulging, mouth opening and closing silently.

"Oh, so you need another clue?"

"My... God... of course, you're... you're HER!"

"Who?" Anja said with a smile as she floated off the floor, the huge block seemingly weightless in her hand.

"You're the one they call Supergirl!"

Anja nodded, unable to suppress a giggle at the astounded look in his eyes. *"Yeah, that's what the media calls me. A goofy name from the comics, don't you think?"*

Gerry's legs were shaking as he walked down the ramp, his eyes staring at the fantastic interplay of muscle across her body. He paused. *"So Mike knows about you?"*

"Of course," Anja laughed. "This room is under his house. I made it while his house was being constructed. I realized some time ago that of all the men on the planet, he alone might understand me. He knows my needs, my loves, my strengths and my weaknesses. And he's got some very compatible genes."

"Weaknesses?" Gerry gasped in wonder. He watched dumbstruck as Anja slowly raised and lowered the huge block, her shoulder and back flexing with infinitely hard muscle as the massive block bobbed around only slightly. Her blonde hair floated around her head thanks to the flying power she was using to balance herself.

"Which makes certain things rather difficult for me," Anja said softly.

"Which things?" Lani said as she suddenly walked through the doorway.

Mike screamed into Brigitte's mouth as he struggled frantically to get free, but her inner muscles clamped down so hard on him that it hurt. "Oh God this is going to be

so good!" she laughed crazily, totally turned on again. She released him just enough to begin rocking herself in his lap, going faster and faster, completely and totally confident of her superior strength.

Mike felt that wave of sick violent arousal coming over him again and knew he had to do something before her pheromone-fueled insanity took him. Desperate, he grabbed the crushed ball bearing from the night stand – five kilos of hardened steel from a railroad locomotive that had been Anja's introduction. He swung it against the side of Brigitte's head with all his strength.

The impact would have killed any human, but the mangled steel merely bounced off Brigitte's head, her hair flying. She slowed her rocking a little, but didn't stop. That berserk fury of black desire started to come over him again. He began pounding her head with the steel bearing again, and again, throwing all his soaring strength into it as he tried to slow her wild fucking. It started to work as she paused to lean heavily on him. He hit her a final time, and she collapsed limply onto the bed beside him. Thankfully this time her inner muscles relaxed enough so he could pull out of her.

He rolled out of bed as his body seemingly exploded with pheromic craziness. Half of him wanted to continue their fucking, the other half wanted to run for his life, both halves making him feel incredibly strong and energetic, seemingly even lighter than air. He sprinted for the door to fumble with the lock, hands shaking wildly from the adrenal rush. He caught a reflection in a picture on the wall, and turned just in time to see Brigitte flip out of the bed like a gymnast to land lithely on the floor. She shook herself like a wet dog, long hair flying. Mike frantically jerked the key out of the lock as he opened the door to duck through and slam it closed, locking it and then breaking the key off in the lock. He dashed for the stairs as Brigitte pounded on the door so hard that the walls shook. Pausing, he looked back to see her fists denting the pol-

ished stainless door. Terror overcame desire as he turned to leap down the remaining steps as if the hound of Hell was at his heels.

Diving through the doorway of first gym, he saw the armored door to Anja's cavern closing on its automatic actuator. Knowing he could never get that handle open again, he threw himself into the disappearing gap, praying he wasn't going to get cut in half. He scraped through to land hard on the stone floor just inside, the door booming closed inches behind his feet. The locking dogs whirred and clunked loudly as they secured the door. That would stop Brigitte, or so he hoped.

The bright lights of the cavern dazzled him as he ran down the ramp, looking for Anja. The cavern looked empty. He began to panic, knowing he wasn't getting out of there on his own. He ran down the central aisle past the huge blocks only to have Lani jump out in front of him. He angrily threw his shoulder into her with all his strength, and their feet tangled up as they fell, Mike landing on top of Lani. He leaped up and away, struggling to stay upright, elated that he'd just taken down a Prime. Glancing back, he saw her staring fixedly at him, her face filled with supreme confidence, her eyes glaring. If not for all the gold, she would have fried him with that look alone.

"She's a Prime, Anja!" he shouted as loudly as he could. Surely she was in here somewhere. **"Lani and Brigitte are both Arions!"**

Behind him, Lani cursed as she reached up to tear her expensive choker off. A red glare and a puff of smoke came from each eye as her black contacts vaporized, revealing the sparkling electric blue irises of a Prime. The biological ring-lasers that formed them powered up as she began metabolizing Orgone again. Mike used the brief split second before those biological lasers began to radiate to dive for the floor, barely avoiding the deadly beams of coherent light that passed close enough to singe his hair. He kept moving, using her brief blindness after the blast to scramble out of sight and into the shadows. His heart was pounding wildly as he cowered in the shadows,

only to have another blinding flash dazzle him as he was painfully showered with molten metal. A long, glowing groove appeared in the block above him.

"I need some of that Velorian shit here, Anja," He shouted as he ran further back between the huge blocks, finally pausing near a steel table along the cavern wall.

Lani's eyes flared again to light the room like oversized photo flashes, the beams neatly slicing the leg off the table next to him, sending another spray of molten steel across the floor. He started to run, only to trip and fall out in the open. Lifting his head, he saw Lani standing about twenty meters away, her eyes already blazing blue as she glared at him. His heart froze as her eyes flared red, knowing he was a dead man. A painful blaze of prickling heat surrounded him, only to fade away seconds later. Somehow he was still alive! Blinking away the dark spots in his vision, he found himself staring at Anja's strong back as she stood directly in front of him, her blonde hair billowing upward from the intense heat, her arms outstretched as she blocked the beams.

Still on his knees, Mike stared out from between her widely-spaced legs to watch her return the favor. Two red beams flashed outward to hit Lani's midriff, and the violent explosion of vaporized fabric, steam and burning skin oils blasted Lani backwards. She twisted athletically in mid-air before landing cat-like on her feet. Reaching out, she grabbed one of the larger blocks and hoisted it over her head, her burned-away clothing revealing fantastically defined muscles. While Anja was still blinded from her heated stare, Lani threw the huge block directly at the two of them. Mike dove frantically to the side, barely escaping the truck-sized block as it crushed Anja to the floor with a dull BOOM that knocked him off his feet.

He stared in renewed horror as Lani walked over to lift the hundred-ton block off Anja and then smash it down on her limp form again. Then again. He cowered behind another of the blocks, thoughts racing as he tried to think of a way to help her. But it was impossible. A Prime like Lani would have a thousand times his strength.

Lani's eyes snapped up to meet his. "You are going to die, Mike," she cooed in her Balinese accent, "along with your little girlfriend and all your friends. But unlike her, I can make it painless for you."

She lifted the huge block over her head with one hand as she bent down to grab Anja by one breast, digging her sinewy fingers deeply into her engorged flesh as she lifted her to dangle at arm's length. Anja was alive but seemingly dazed.

Despite being terrified by Lani's laser vision, not to mention that horribly heavy block she was holding, Mike couldn't just leave Anja there. He had to do something. Thankfully, before he did anything too stupid, Anja's eyes opened and she grabbed Lani's arm to spin her around in mid-air, steel block and all. Mike dove for the floor as Anja sent the hundred-ton block flying with Lani's fingers still buried in it, the huge weight carrying her across the cavern to crash into the wall near the entrance. Anja followed up with another long blaze of laser vision that melted the steel block and some of the rock around Lani, enveloping her inside that glowing, molten mixture.

Lani casually rose back to her feet to stand in the red-hot pudding, her hands resting on her hips as she pushed her breasts forward into those lethal beams. Reaching out with one hand, she buried her fingers in the armored entrance door to wrench it screaming from its frame with her raw strength, the huge hardened-steel hinges exploding apart. Then, with a burst of incredible strength, she threw the thousand kilo door toward Anja like a gigantic Frisbee to crumple against Anja's invulnerable body, wrapping nearly all the way around her tiny waist, slamming her back against another of the blocks.

"This is insane, Lani," Anja said as she blinked the heat from her eyes. She effortlessly tore the armored door from herself to toss it away with a thundering clang. "Our civilizations may be at war, but we don't have to fight, Lani. Not here. Not on Earth. Not where all humanity started."

Lani just smiled as she casually tore a ragged handful of solid steel from the vault-like door frame, working it as effortlessly as a Nerf ball. The steel screamed as her hand as it heated red-hot from the steel's internal friction. "Are you sure you want me to use these hands on you? Or on Mike? You may have pumped up the one part of him that Brigitte just enjoyed, but the rest of him is still quite frail."

Anja glanced questionably at me, then forced a laugh. "I'm sorry, Lani, but your parlor tricks and mind games might impress some people, but I'm not one of them. You're strong. So what. I am too."

"Nevertheless, I am going to kill you," Lani growled. "Your death will be exquisitely painful, beautiful even, I promise you that."

She was as insane as Brigitte. That lethal combination of Arion bloodlust and sexual predation had taken her. Stuff I'd written about, thinking in my dreams that it was wildly sexy. But now, faced with the reality of it, it just felt sick and twisted.

"We don't have to fight, Lani," Anja said again in a smooth, calm voice. "You understand the people of Earth as I do; you've obviously lived here for a long time. You know we can work together. Your vaunted Empire doesn't need Earth. It's no threat to anyone."

Lani sneered. "The future belongs to Homo Sapiens Supremis alone, not to these Frails who breed like rats and kill each other like vermin. The destruction of this planet will be a symbol of the Emperor's power. No other world will dare oppose him."

She sounded like a bad George Lucas script.

"Besides, you're not a real Protector," Lani continued. "If you want to prolong the lives of these Frails who worship you, then come and stand before me. I will try to end your life quickly. Your friends will then have many years to remember your sacrifice before our Fleet arrives to end it all."

Anja growled. "I don't think so, sister. You want me, then come and claim me. The hard way."

Lani clenched her fists, impossibly hard muscle reshaping her arms and shoulders. "No one in this house will survive our battle. Is that what you wish?"

Anja glanced at Mike, a flicker of fear in her eyes. She was seriously worried now.

"Don't listen to her, Anja," he shouted as he ran out into the open. "She's bluffing. Just take her down quickly."

The words were barely out of his mouth when Lani spun around to throw her ball of glowing steel at him. Before he could move, Anja appeared like magic to blunt Lani's missile away. She returned fire with another blistering stare. This time Lani merely put her hands on her hips and soaked the eye beams up, her breasts seemingly growing fuller by the second.

"That's not a good idea, Anja," Mike shouted, knowing Anja was still blinded from her blast. "She's fired up enough to absorb your energy and use it against..."

His words were cut off when Lani leaped halfway across the cavern to grab Gerry by his shirt to hoist him off the floor. She closed her other hand around his neck from the back to hold him dangling as she flew over to land in front of Anja. "You know how ridiculously easy it would be for me to snap his neck. Submit to me now or he's the first to die."

"Kill anyone and I will kill you," Anja growled low, sounding like a tigress. "But if you leave Earth now, I'll allow you to go untouched. You and Brigitte."

Lani laughed. "You don't seem to understand how this game is played. I will go, but I'll take your life with me. Whether any of these Frails survive is up to you."

Gerry's lips started turning blue. Mike had to do something and fast. Spotting the heavy axle lying beside the tilting workbench, part of an old tractor he was trying to restore with Anja's help, he raced down the opposite side of the block to grab it. Lani

didn't see him as any kind of threat, so he had to do his best to become one. He used his enhanced strength to grunt the axle off the floor, resting it on his shoulder like a huge bat. Running silently up behind her, he used every ounce of his strength to swing it at her knees. His blow would have taken a human's legs off at the knees, but all it did was knock Lani slightly off-balance. He followed that up by stabbing the two-hundred pound axle into her back with all the strength he could muster. It bounced off her to knock him down.

The blow kept Lani off balance long enough to give Anja an opening. She lunged for her, forcing Lani to toss Gerry to the side to meet her attack. The two of them crashed into each other to start wrestling in mid-air. They rose upward to hit the ceiling hard enough to shower the floor with broken rock.

Mike grabbed Gerry to throw him over his shoulder as he carried him up the ramp as fast as he could toward the open doorway. He'd barely made it halfway there when Gerry started gagging and coughing up blood. Mike set him down to let him breathe, and a bit of color returned to Gerry's face. They both turned back to see Anja aim a blast of laser vision into Lani's eyes, dazzling her. She took advantage of Lani's brief blindness to throw another of the huge blocks at her. Lani sensed it coming anyway and delivered a massive punch that send the block flying backward to land on Anja instead. The deafening BOOM of her supersonic punch and the crashing impact of the block knocked both men off their feet. Anja rose to kick the monster block spinning away as if it was merely made of Styrofoam. The amount of power the two of them were expending was terrifying.

Lani continued her attack with a meter-thick steel column that weighed tons, swinging it at nearly supersonic speed to cut Anja down. Then she leaped on top of Anja to pin her to the floor beneath the column. Anja fought back by wrapping her long legs around the column to grip Lani's waist with her heels, her long legs flexing

with muscles far harder than steel. She used her Velorian strength to pull Lani toward herself, crushing the thick column between them. The steel gave off a horrible metallic groan as it flattened and bulged outward. With a supreme burst of power, Lani tore herself free as Anja's lethal scissors-hold instead crushed the thick column into two ragged sections.

Frustrated, Anja leaped back to her feet to deliver a bevy of punches that filled the air with deafening sonic booms and room-shaking impacts, the blows driving Lani back. Even with ears covered and mouth open, Mike's eardrums were painfully assaulted. The punishing shockwaves from each of her punches were so strong they briefly stopped his heart.

Staggered by the blows, Lani allowed Anja to close with her, and then delivered an upward punch that sent Anja flying across the floor to hit the far wall hard enough to crack it. Staggered, Anja collapsed limply to the floor. She struggled to get back to her feet, eyes glazed, never seeing the two-hundred ton block that Lani threw to land directly on top of her.

Across the cavern, smoke rose from around the bus-sized block that had crushed Anja. Then it started to vibrate. Anja was still alive under there. Behind him, Mike heard Gerry gurgling as he clawed at his partially crushed throat, lips turning blue. He turned to throw himself over Gerry just before the block on top of Anja exploded to send huge chunks of lead and sharp pieces of torn steel flying all over the cavern. A few that probably would have killed Gerry bounced painfully off Mike's toughened back. Anja reappeared where the block had been, her skin glowing from impact friction, her gown completely torn away now. She ignored the flames that licked brightly upward between her bare legs, her body splattered with molten lead and steel. Both women launched themselves to collide again in the middle of the cavern.

The incredible shockwave blasted both men another ten feet up the ramp.

Leaning down to check on Gerry, Mike couldn't feel any breath and his pulse was ragged. He started pounding on Gerry's chest while breathing for him. Behind them, Lani delivered more punches that sent Anja flying to land upside down in a far corner, her tangled mane of blonde hair hiding her face. She wasn't moving. Lani hoisted another of the biggest blocks over her head, this time a three-hundred tonner. Yet instead of throwing it at Anja, she turned slowly around and smiled at Mike as he worked on Gerry.

"It's been real, Mike. You thought you were writing fantasies for Sharon's page. You were wrong. Think dream injection, a technology we developed. We've had you working for us all the while. You were the bait."

"Bullshit," Mike shouted back at her. "They were my own ideas. My dreams."

She smirked. "Then I guess you can dream this away before it lands on you." She flung the massive block directly at him.

Mike threw himself futilely over Gerry as the mountain of steel approached like a speeding freight train to... WHANG! A deafening ring of steel on steel was accompanied by a swish of silky hair across his face and a very feminine grunt. Mike opened his eyes to see Anja standing a few feet in front of him, leaning backward with the huge block resting on her chest, her back muscles astoundingly defined as she squatted with the semi-truck sized block only inches over his head. Her fingers were buried in the thick stainless steel jacket. Despite the seriousness of the situation, he couldn't resist leaning forward to give his savior's backside a little kiss. Her muscles felt like warm steel against his lips as she thrust herself upward to throw the huge block the other way.

Lani confirmed Mike's worst fears by grinning as she caught it one-handed. Her supreme confidence said she was totally in control, and that was followed by casually tossing double-decker bus-sized block behind her like it was nothing. It hit with earth-

quake force, the vibrations shaking loose another shower of rock from the ceiling as the men bounced off the floor. Mike covered his head as he lay across Gerry's prone body, feeling weak and useless.

When the rocks stopped falling, he opened his eyes to see Lani and Anja wrestling again, their nude bodies covered with a sheen of sweat and rock dust. Lani was winning, her raw strength clearly greater than Anja's. She used her superior strength to slowly bend Anja's hands down beside her, and then smashed her forehead into Anja so hard that she buried her feet in the rock floor. A riot of cracks radiated for fifty feet in all directions. Anja jerked her feet free to wrap her long legs around Lani in a scissors hold, the air whooshing from Lani's lungs. Lani grinned fiercely as she reached forward to wrap her fingers around Anja's neck, the tendons of her hands and wrists flexing like steel cables as she tried to crush the life from her, her grip incomprehensibly strong.

Mike looked around desperately for some kind of weapon, only to see a pair of very pretty feet land next to him. Brigitte's strong arms closed around him from the back to jerk him to his feet.

"Gotcha, Mike." Her hug emptied his lungs. "I have better uses for you than having you die here. Gerry can take his chances." She started to drag him up the ramp. Brigitte's firm breasts were flattened against his back as her nipples dug into his flesh like steel bullets. Despite all the blows he'd delivered to her head, she was still freakily turned on. How many stories had he written about lethal combat being the ultimate an Arion sexual thrill?

He fought back with all the strength he had left, grabbing a long screwdriver from the workbench to stab it back over his shoulder toward her face. He stabbed again and again. On his fifth thrust, Brigitte gave off a soft cry and released him. He twisted away to see her pulling the screwdriver out of her eye socket where it had jammed

beside her eyeball. There was no sign of injury or blood, but she was blinking in pain. Now was his chance. He grabbed the massive wrench he'd used to pull the axle out of the tractor and swung it at her face, his blow landing perfectly against her cheekbones. A loud crunch of breaking bone radiated up his arm along with a wave of blinding pain – his own wrist had just snapped. Brigitte just stood there blinking, looking both beautiful and slightly dazed. Those high cheekbones, part of her stock in trade as a model, would feel normal enough to a makeup artist, but hit hard enough, they were harder than steel.

She recovered from the blow to jerk the wrench from his now useless hand, and then bent it in half over her knee, an array of astoundingly-defined muscles reshaping her slender arms to prove that Arion muscular expansion is several times that of a human. Shocked, Mike realized her strength was soaring above normal Betan levels thanks to her arousal. He had no doubt now that she would fuck him to death if she had the chance. In desperation, he grabbed a thick steel bar from the floor and swung it at her like a oversized baseball bat. Luck was with me as he got another clean hit on the side of her head. She staggered and fell to her knees. Exploiting her relative weakness again, he continued his murderous attack, swinging the bar overhead and sideways again and again with every ounce of strength and willpower that he now possessed, connecting solidly each time with Brigitte's head. He kept it up until she collapsed on the floor, unconscious. Staggering back a step, he shifted his grip and continuing pummeling her. This was payback for controlling his mind and libido with her damnable pheromones. She had raped him in his own bed, pure and simple.

His arms were too tired to lift the bar anymore as he collapsed beside her unconscious form, the bent bar clanging to the rock floor. He turned back just in time to see Lani bending Anja's body the wrong way, her Primal muscles flexing with horrible

power as she seemed determined to break Anja in half. Her steel fingers were probing Anja's neck for the pressure points that lay there.

"NO," he screamed as leaped back to his feet to grab the first thing he could find that might do some damage: a large sledgehammer. His weariness was forgotten as he ran down the ramp to swing the huge sledge against Lani's back with all his considerable might. The steel head rebounded from her tight muscles like he'd hit rubber-coated steel, the vibration nearly breaking his good wrist this time. He ignored the pain in his broken one as he swung the sledge at Lani's head. Yet unlike Brigitte's slow reflexes, Lani snapped her head unnaturally far around to see it coming, her hand flashing up to stop the hurtling sledge a few millimeters from her nose. Mike tried to jerk the hammer back, but it felt as if was anchored to the core of the Earth now. Lani just smiled as she slowly crushed the hardened steel in her grip, making it look soft clay. Then, with a quick twist of her wrist, she snapped it off the handle to throw him backward.

Mike fell to his knees holding the broken handle, very nearly passing out from the pain of his now severely broken wrist. Lani held the sledge hammer head in front of his face as she continued squishing it like yesterday's mashed potatoes, the steel tendons standing up on her hand and wrist as the hardened steel squished out both sides of her hand.

"You, fighting me?" She laughed.

He drew back, cowering as he clenched his broken wrist to his stomach. Lani spun back around to smash it into Anja's solar plexus so hard that the blast of air sent Mike flying. The powerful blow doubled Anja over, blonde hair flying like a cloud around her. She fell to her knees, retching and gasping.

Mike stared in horror as Lani delivered a double fisted blow with the sledge head to the back of Anja's head, driving her face down into the stone floor. She began

stomping on the back of Anja's head with her bare foot, the floor shaking with every blow as she buried Anja's entire upper body in the granite floor. A cloud of blonde hair was all that was left, splaying across the floor like spun gold. Anja wasn't moving. Satisfied, Lani stood back up to turn to face Mike, her eyes sparkling with excitement. She was truly enjoying herself.

"You're further along in your morphing than I thought, Mike. We might make an Arion out of you yet. Anja chose you well."

Brigitte approached him from the side, smiling brightly as she proved yet again that she could shake off his worst blows. His heart dropped to his toes. Anja was down and he was standing in the room with two Arions who wanted him dead, one a nearly omnipotent Prime.

Brigitte grabbed him from the back to hold him rigidly in her frighteningly strong embrace.

"I'll make this fast, Mike," Lani said as she raised her fist. "Unlike my incompetent assistant here."

He closed his eyes, knowing it was over now. Her punch was going to turn his head into pink mist. But that's when he heard Mark shouting at the top of his lungs as he ran across the floor. He jammed himself between the two of them.

"Lani, no. He's my oldest friend," Mark cried as he grabbed Lani's fist full of steel. "I trusted you, I gave you my heart and I shared my life with you and now this? This is how you reward it? By killing my friends?"

"This is what I do," Lani said with an ominous note in her voice. "I was born to kill Velorians, and anyone who stands in my way. You are standing in my way."

Mike stared wide-eyed at the two of them, his heart pounding, stomach clenched painfully with the fear of death, only to see Lani's eyes fill with tears. Mark reached out to hug her steel-hard body to himself, seemingly oblivious to the fact that she could

kill him with a mere flick of her finger. She closed her eyes for a moment before gently kissing him.

"I have to kill the Velorian, my love. I was sent here to do that. To find and destroy any Protectors." She paused for a long moment with her eyes closed. "To also eliminate anyone who knows about them. Without exception." She wrapped her arms intimately around Mark's shoulders. "I'm sorry, my love. I know they are your friends. But I will at least spare you watching them die." A fresh tear fell down her cheek as her arms began to tighten.

Mike screamed in horror as he realized that she was going to crush him against her chest in Arion fashion. "NO! It doesn't have to end this way, Lani. Anja's not a Protector. She's just an ordinary Velorian. She isn't here to fight you. She came here as a young girl. The only thing she knows about Protectors is what I've taught her."

Lani kissed Mark tenderly. A goodbye kiss.

"Listen to me, Lani. Mark deserves your compassion, doesn't he? He's not part of any of this. His only sin is that of loving you."

Lani paused as her large blue eyes rose over Mark's shoulder to glare at Mike. Her eyes flashed, but instead of killing him with her laser vision, she tried to smile through her tears. She wasn't behaving anything like the Prime's he'd written about. She stepped slowly away from Mark to walk over to face Mike, her deceptively soft hands rising to embrace his face. Her gentle touch didn't fool him.

"I really should kill you first, Mike. You're the one who caused so much trouble with that web site." He felt her cool hands sliding down to close around his neck. "But you also brought Anja to me, so I'll make it mercifully quick. I'm told traumatic decapitation is painless." Her fingers closed like steel bands.

"No, Lani, damn it," Mark shouted again. "We made a promise long ago to obey each other. They were called marriage vows. You believed in those then. Why can't you believe in them now?"

Lani's hands miraculously opened as she turned back to face Mark again. She was breathing fast now, tears falling like a river down her cheeks.

"I cannot ignore either my biology or my mission, Mark, no matter how strongly my soul calls out to me to do just that." She reached down with one hand to grab Anja's hair to lift her limply from the floor. "Whatever I do with the rest of you, I must end the threat of this Protector at least. She could become very dangerous to our cause."

"She knows nothing of your war, Lani," Mike cried. "You said yourself that your orders are to eliminate Protectors. To prepare the way for your fleet to attack Earth. But she isn't one. You know she's not nearly that powerful. Your orders do not apply here. And an Arion always obeys her orders, right?"

"Don't hurt them, Lani," Anja whispered as her eyes blinked open, her voice almost too soft to hear. "Any of them."

"I offered you that chance earlier, Anja. Your life for your friends."

"Then take my life now," Anja said softly. "But leave Mike and the others alone."

Mike watched in horror as Anja opened her arms wide, her body relaxed and defenseless.

"You give yourself to me? Your life for theirs?" Lani asked.

Anja merely nodded. Her lower lip trembled as her eyes filled with tears. She was so brave, but she was terrified.

Lani raised her hands to gently brush her fingers across Anja's chest, her hands encircling her breasts. "It will be a shame to put an end to such beauty. To snuff out such a vibrant life force. But we both know that I must."

Anja lifted her arms to rest them gently on Lani's shoulders. "You can have me. Just don't hurt anyone else."

Lani nodded as she buried her fingers deeply into Anja's soft breasts, squeezing with a force that could crush the hardest steel. Anja cried out in pain as Lani's grip forced her body to protect itself. Energy that should have fueled Anja's muscles raced back to her chest to protect her, growing and growing until it flashed into an Orgone flair, her breasts glowing white-hot.

Mike was thrown backward from the blast as Anja's chest seemed to explode with power, the escaping Orgone energy racing up Lani's arms to fill her body. Lani cried out, positively orgasmic as she stole Anja's source of strength and invulnerability.

Anja cried out as well, but in agony, her tears vaporizing as they fell. She hung limply with her feet dangling, held only by her breasts. "Is there... no other... way," she gasped. "To save... my friends?"

Lani shook her head slowly as she leaned forward, softly kissing Anja as the muscles of her arms and shoulders became even more defined. She was drawing ever more of Anja's power into herself.

It was hopeless, but Mike leaped forward to grab Lani's hair with his good hand. Anja was not going to sacrifice herself for him, no matter what her Velorian principles said. He pulled with all his strength, but her head didn't budge. Brigitte grabbed him from behind to rip him away and toss him across the floor where he skidded painfully on his face. When he rolled over to wipe the blood away, he saw Gerry proving that he deserved to be called friend. He'd grabbed the antique double-barrel ten-gauge shotgun from the gun cabinet and stuffed two huge shells into it. He jammed the barrel against the back of Brigitte's head. "Let Anja go, Lani, or Brigitte dies. She's one of yours."

Lani turned to look at him balefully. "You threaten me with your own wife? A woman who means more to you than she does to me." She smiled. "Ok, fine, kill her. You have my permission." She turned her attention back to the slow, painful process of stealing Anja's life.

Brigitte snarled at the usual callousness of a Prime. They were infamous for treating Betans only a little better than humans. Her eyes narrowed as something long simmering snapped inside her. She spun around to face Gerry, his arms shaking as he held the double barrels against her breast.

"I will shoot," Gerry shouted. "I will. You're a monster!"

Brigitte ignored him as she reached down into her bag to emerge holding some kind of exotic weapon. Gerry saw the weapon and fired both barrels, the blast flattening Brigitte's breast as the recoil threw him backward to land with the smoking shotgun beside him. Both barrels were shredded open at their ends. Brigitte grabbed her breast in pain, powder residue covering her chest, but her focus was on Lani. Mike hit the floor as she swept her exotic weapon his way. A brilliant column of searing light flashed across the cavern to shockingly explode against the middle of Lani's back. She screamed as her body spasmed and fell to her knees in obvious agony, her arms shaking too wildly to hang onto Anja.

Anja dove to the side as Brigitte blasted Lani a second time.

Lani gritted her teeth in agony as she slowly rose to her feet to turn and face Brigitte, the center of her body radiating waves of orange and red. Brigitte advanced as she fired again, driving toward Lani as the strange beam's resistance grew with decreasing distance. The beam seared its way across Lani's stomach to send a cloud of steam rising from her skin, and for a brief second it appeared to have cut her open. That hope ended as Lani threw herself against the apparent solidness of the beam to push Brigitte backward to pin her against the wall. Brigitte fired again, and a massive

explosion from the trapped energy beam sent her flying nearly two hundred meters down the cavern.

Mike felt a brief hope as Lani staggered and then fell to her knees as her skin took on a metallic sheen from the extreme heat. He dove for Brigitte's weapon along with Gerry but they were both too slow. Lani reached down to grab it in her smoking hands and lift it to her blazing chest where it began to melt. Pressing inward with her palms, she crushed it against herself until it exploded into sparks and smoke. She smiled fiercely at Mike as she tossed the ruined superweapon over her shoulder.

He tried to get away, but she moved too quickly, landing on top to pin him to the floor, her knees touching the floor on either side of his head. He suddenly found himself looking up between her impossibly strong thighs.

"Would you like to die the way you've written about, Mike? Your face buried between my legs. Trying to pleasure me during your last moments, begging for mercy."

He gasped for air as her thighs tightened painfully around his head. He clawed at her silky skin as he tried to pull her knees apart, but her thighs might as well have been carved from warm steel.

"Ok, lets make this fun and do it by exponentials, Mike. One is ten pounds, two is a hundred, three is a thousand, four is..." She giggled. "Well, four is unnecessary. You are still too frail for me."

She sounded completely insane. This was anything but a game.

"Anja," Mike gasped in a shaky voice. "Time...get up...need you...now."

"Too late for that," Lani whispered softly as she leaned down to cover his face with her hair.

"One."

Her legs gently held his ears, her skin warm and deceptively sexy, her musky scent signaling this was turning her on.

"Two."

Her thighs closed like a steel vice, his eyes bulging as a horrible pain exploded inside his head. At the same time, her musky scent grew stronger as the Primal paradox of death and arousal consumed her, her musky wetness covering his face. He was suddenly assaulted with a rush of misplaced desires as her pheromones filled his senses, far stronger than Brigitte's, washing away the stink of cruelty and sexual depravity that was a Prime. Along with his fear. Her lips started to form the next count, everything happening in slow motion as a word formed that Mike knew was the last one he would ever hear. Yet her damnable pheromones compelled him to run his hands over the silky softness of thighs, thrilling to the power of those smooth thighs, sinews of steel filled with the near infinite strength of a Prime. He literally felt his skull bending inward, skull creaking and starting to crack when something smashed into him.

The pressure disappeared as he opened his eyes to see Anja's face inches from his. She'd jammed herself between Lani's legs.

"...three."

The superhuman flex of Lani's thighs was resisted by Anja's head and shoulders as she shoved Mike painfully from between Lani's legs, which closed around her instead of him.

Lani just laughed. "Three is hardly enough for you, Anja dear. How about ten!" Her thighs flexed massively as Anja cried out in pain this time.

He grabbed his other shotgun – a 12-gauge pump – and jammed it against Lani's ear and fired. The blast knocked him backwards but didn't seem to bother her. He pumped another round in and fired the 00 buckshot directly into Lani's temple, the blast sending her hair flying. She turned to glare at him with glowing eyes as he fired the third shell, this one a slug, into her right eye. She cursed and slapped the shotgun from his hands, clawing at her eye to dig the soft lead out from around her eyeball.

There was no blood. No sign of injury. Her eyes started to glow brighter as she continued to squeeze Anja with all the power in her legs. Ignoring the danger, Mike threw himself at her, flailing with his fists, knowing he was going to die anyway.

He was thrown violently backward as Anja poured the last of her power into flight – her greatest power – and drove the two of them up into the ceiling. The blow freed Anja’s head from Lani’s crushing grip, and she took advantage of her superior flight power to throw Lani across the cavern, her arms and legs clawing helplessly at the air until she impacted the far wall with a loud crunch. Anja flew after her to deliver blows so fast they were just a blur, each deafening blow driving Lani’s head and upper body further into the solid granite rock like a nail into wood. The swell of Lani’s hips stopped Anja until she kicked with all her remaining strength, her bare foot landing directly between Lani’s legs to drive her into the wall to her knees.

For the first time, Mike felt a surge of hope as Anja wavered around in mid-air. Hope died when seconds later when she collapsed in a crumpled pile of golden skin and blonde hair, shaking and retching on the floor. Anja was starving for Orgone as she lifted her head to shout at him. “Get everyone out of here before she gets free. Do it!”

Mike stared at the solid rock around Lani as he heard it cracking loudly. Lani might not have all of Anja’s flight power, but she was using incredible strength to extend her arms inside the solid rock wall. Chips of granite began exploding outward from cracks that radiated outward from her body.

Anja cursed as she staggered over to toss Mike up the ramp toward the open door, then sent Gerry and Mark skidding after him. “Get as far away as you can,” she cried. “Lani only wants me.”

Behind her, Mike watched in horror as the rock wall exploded in a shower of rock. Lani's strength was at its maximum now thanks to all the Orgone she'd absorbed from Anja. There was nothing more any of them could do to stop her.

Mike was blinded by tears as Gerry and Mark dragged him up the ramp and through the doorway. Kevin was standing there, holding something he'd just pulled from Lani's gym bag. The short metal tube was decorated more like artwork than any weapon. He pushed the button on the side and a brilliant blade that looked for all the world like a light saber emerged from the handle.

Mike's first thought was that they'd gotten to George Lucas too.

Kevin startled them all by swishing the blade around, the contained light beam giving off squeaking, groaning sounds as he drew it through the air. He sliced at one end of a weight machine, and the blade effortlessly cut through the thick steel. Satisfied, he ran through the doorway into the cavern and down the ramp with Bo barking and growling at his heels.

"Kevin, Bo, NO!" the men cried after them.

The swish and groan of the beam changed to a screaming sibilant scream that was followed by Lani's painful shout. Then more sharp, sizzling sounds as if it was buried in something. They heard Kevin call "Take it Anja!" and then he came thundering back up the ramp to dive through the door. Behind him was the unmistakable sizzle of a light saber striking, but much faster than Kevin's sword work, the sizzling sounds rising into a scream as the saber went into overload. A scream that sounded almost human.

They should have run for their lives, but they were fatally drawn to that last scream. Crawling to the doorway, Mike saw Anja standing in the middle of the cavern, holding the light saber high over her head with Lani intimately impaled on the glowing blade. Bo's jaws were locked around Lani's ankle as he hung in mid-air, her legs shaking wild-

ly as sparks exploded from her center and flames came from her mouth and ears and nose, her lower body pulsing with waves of red and yellow heat, glowing from the inside out. They all stared wide-eyed through the doorway as the full power of the saber poured into Lani's intimate self as Anja wrapped her free arm around Lani's waist and pulled her down onto the blade to bury it further yet. She held it there until Lani's spasms peaked and then she collapsed.

Anja shut the light saber down as her knees collapsed. She crumpled to the floor to land on top of Lani's glowing body. Bo released his grip on Lani's ankle to come over and lick Anja's face.

Gerry broke free to rush down the ramp to go to Brigitte, kneeling beside her silent form but seemingly afraid to touch her. He had no idea if she'd survived that final explosion.

Mike stood in the doorway, body shaking from shock, his eyeballs seemingly too large for their sockets. He picked up an old workout shirt and staggered down the ramp where he kneeled beside Anja to pull the shirt over her. It was at least three sizes too large, but at least she wasn't nude anymore. Somehow that seemed important.

Mark stared down at Lani's glowing body, a curl of smoke rising from between her legs. "She claimed to love me, but she wasn't even human," he said numbly. "She was only pretending. She was..."

"She IS human," Anja corrected. "Just another kind."

Mark looked at her, hope in his eyes. "Is? You mean she's alive?"

Anja shrugged. "Of course. It would take a lot more than a light saber to kill a Prime. Or me, for that matter. She's just suffering a bit of heatstroke right now."

"And when she awakens...?"

"She'll still be a murderous Prime intent on killing me. Kevin too for his part in this. Probably all of you. Even poor Bo here. We have some precautions to make to prevent that."

Mark knelt beside Lani, his voice barely audible as he told her she was going to be OK.

Mike didn't know what to say. Mark hadn't known his wife was Arion, but after all she'd just done, and now that he knew, how could a man love such a monster?

Anja floated off the floor to hover, her body regenerating and healing itself even as I watched. "Talk to me, Mike. Are you Ok?"

He tried to smile, but his head hurt too much and his ears were ringing and his throat felt half crushed. He saw Kevin standing over Lani and Mark, pointing the light saber between her knees, eyes wide as if he was caught in an impossible dream. He knew what he had to do if she moved.

"Kevin saved us all," Anja said softly. "I had no idea that Lani even had one of those things. They are very rare. A throwback to an earlier time."

She walked over to take the saber gently from Kevin's hand, and drew the tip along the stone floor next to Lani, cutting a groove that left molten rock bubbling on either side. "Go find all the gold that Lani tore off, Kevin. Pile the pieces along this groove. I need to make some restraints before she awakes."

"She's not dead?!" Kevin gasped in horror.

Anja shook her head. "Just out until she cools down. A few minutes at most."

Kevin ran off, desperately picked up pieces of gold.

Mike walked over to put his arm around Mark's shoulder. "Nobody could fake the look I saw earlier in Lani's eyes, Mark. She cares about you, and that caring saved my life. But Primes are born with certain instincts and compulsions that are even stronger than love. She could not deny her destiny once she came face to face with Anja."

"That's bullshit, Mike. Everyone gets a choice in what they do."

"Don't underestimate the dark side of Supremis genetics. Arions and Velorians were designed as one race, but now they hate each other beyond all reason. Hate they cannot reason away. Hate that's in their DNA."

Mark shook his head slowly. "I don't believe that."

"Even worse, Mark, the outcome of a battle between a Prime and a Velorian is pre-ordained. One must die. Yet that hasn't happened here. Not yet anyway."

Mark stepped back from her, his face twisted as his hope was replaced with a new fear. "What to you mean, not yet?"

Anja said nothing as she watched Kevin quickly position all the gold pieces along the groove in the floor. She squinted her eyes to play her weakened laser vision over the pieces, quickly melting them to fill the groove with liquid gold.

She turned around as she waited for it to cool, looking sad. "There will be others, Mike. You know that. We can't let our personal emotions and sentiments cloud what we have to do now. I might not be a Protector, but its time to start acting like one. Once I weaken her with this gold, I have to end her threat."

Mike hugged Anja tightly, scared by what she was saying. Her skin was very warm and moist. She hugged him back almost too tightly, her body as hard as Lani's.

"No! We have to get past all this racial hatred, Anja. To think past it. We can turn some of the embedded Arions to our side if we get to them soon enough. Some of those implanted agents will still be children just as Lani was back on Bali."

She shook her head, "I don't think you know what you're asking, Mike. Lani could defeat any human army. Even a Primal child could take out your most powerful weapons."

"Yet you are here to protect us, Anja. Earth does not need to be a battleground. If their agents stop reporting in, do you think the fleet will still come? They'll assume there are several Protectors here taking out their people. They would sense a trap."

Anja looked shocked. "Do you have any idea how close Lani came to killing me? If not for Kevin's discovery of that lightsaber and his selfless bravery, I'd be dead right now. The next Prime we meet might not be confused by her lover's presence. I'm not nearly as strong as they are."

"Then get stronger. Draw more energy. Work to become the equal of a Prime."

"It doesn't work that way," Anja said softly. "Their power is in their genetics. My genes are simply not that good. I can't get that strong no matter how hard I work out." She sighed deeply. "Taking care of the Arions was always so easy in those stories of yours. Not so in the real world. Not for me anyway."

"Yet I never portrayed the Arions as being in love with a human, Anja. Nor did they ever have anyone to love them back. The reality is that we are all human inside; your emotions, your feelings are still like ours. Lani too. Once the Arions live among us for long enough, they can change. They will change. If we help them."

Anja smiled beautifully. "You're crazy, you know that? Did Lani act like she'd changed? The next Prime we meet will probably punch your face into pink mist for even suggesting it."

"Not if we find a way to contact Velor first. Get a real Protector assigned here. She could handle them. Meanwhile, we get to work finding and converting the embedded children. The adults if we can too. And you could continue to be Supergirl, fighting for justice for the rest of us."

Anja said nothing as she walked over to rip the two remaining legs off my heavy steel bench, the tortured steel screaming in her grip. She wrapped one leg around Brigitte's wrists and the other around her ankles, and then fused them both with her

laser vision. Walking back, she dug the still soft gold bar from the groove in the floor and wrapped it twice around Lani's neck, fusing it closed with another blaze of her eyes.

She finally walked back over to lean softly against Mike. He put his arm comfortably around her. "Maybe I could find their ship and take it to Velor, Mike. Wherever Velor is. The location must be in their nav computer. But I would be gone for some time. Months at least. Maybe years. You would be very vulnerable to any further Arions appearing. Not to mention those terrorists. We know who is arming them now. And while Brigitte and Lani are secure for the moment, they likely were reporting their movements. Someone will come looking for them."

"Wait a minute, Anja. You once told me that all Supremis are bound to honor promises to the death once they make them. That the Galen built that unbreakable compulsion into you for their children's protection."

"That's another thing you dreamed. I left Velor when I was young. I don't remember anything like that."

"But if it's true, and so far everything else I've dreamed has been true thanks to their damnable dream injection, then maybe we could get Lani to promise to serve us and not the Empire?"

Anja shook her head. "That involves breaking one promise with another. I doubt it works that way."

"But what if she thought she'd truly died and was resurrected by you? Can you stop her heart for a few hours or days or whatever it would take to bring her to the edge of death? Then restart it? Would that erase her first vow? You said promises are held until death."

She exhaled slowly. "That is very dangerous thinking, Mike. You're just guessing at how things work. I have no training in this area. You're also inventing your own defini-

tion of death. You don't know that Lani thinks that way. Or even that she'd be aware of what was happening. Perhaps to her, death is defined as an unrecoverable event. Worse than that, you are relying on dreams that are partially your own. Do you want to put your neck in Lani's hands again? Or Brigitte's for that matter."

"But if it did work," he said excitedly, "then we'd have them working for us. Brigitte already rebelled against Lani. We can turn her. The empire will kill her if they find out. And if we somehow can turn Lani, you could go to Velor to get help while Lani replaces you here."

"A Prime? As Supergirl?" Anja asked incredulously. "Do you have any idea how crazy that is? She kills for fun."

"But she will honor her promises, if we can get her to make them."

Anja sighed. "You are asking for the impossible."

Mike shook his head. "Impossible is all of us being alive right now. Besides, you once claimed that Terrans are the best at finding ways that shouldn't exist. That we're very good at thinking out of the box. That it's the one area where we are superior even to your people. We find ways when none should exist. Well, this is my way."

Anja slowly shook her head.

"Besides, as Lani said, we're all dead when their fleet arrives here if we don't have any Protectors. How many Primes will they bring with them? We humans have nothing to lose for trying."

She stared at me for a long moment, looking like a beautiful teenage girl again, not a warrior. "We humans?" she smiled impishly, a sparkle in her eye as her sense of humor returned. "You forget that I've been declared a goddess now."

Mike made a show of bowing low before her. "Then as our goddess, you've got a couple of Arions to win over to the light. And you've also got a young hero to thank. He saved us all."

Epilogue

There is much more to tell about Lani and Brigitte and Mike's friends along with the girl the world continues to call Supergirl. How they started a rebellion against the Empire. Not all of it is good, but some of it is.

For the moment, I'll relate the events at the Prom at Cherry Creek High School, which will always be remembered by those who attended. The dance where Kevin, a trainer and lowly water boy from the football team arrived with the most fabulous girl on the planet on his arm. Dressed in a red and blue gown with a filmy cape fluttering, she wore little red ballet slippers on her normally bare feet.

She proceeded to teach Kevin and his classmates the fine points of Velorian air dancing, her pheromones keeping the chaperones very busy in the process. She ended the night by teaching Kevin a special air dance that begins as an elaborate form of foreplay and continues until consummation. They danced as one while floating up into the night sky, two lovers embraced by the stars, and disappeared.

Anja didn't return to the mountaintop house until almost dawn, cuddling up in the broken bed with Mike but seemingly content to just sleep. Far from him to ask what she and Kevin had been doing all night. But given she's Velorian, he didn't need to ask.

If his guess is right, Kevin may soon outgrow his trainer role, thanks to Anja's intimate magic. He'll be a starter on the team next year if he wants, his remarkable strength surprising everyone. The NFL awaits if that's his desire.

Staring at the ceiling as Anja snuggled beside him, he wasn't happy about sharing Anja, but to be honest, he knew he always had. It's just the way Velorians love. Without boundaries. And when he forced himself to be brutally honest, he realized she looked more appropriate on Kevin's arm than his.

Anja belonged to the world now, not just to him. But when they return from their long journey to her homeworld, perhaps this house would remain her new home.

Yes, their journey. Anja had found the Arion ship and removed the Captain and two crewmen on board, all Betans as usual. Then she rigged up a capsule out of spare parts she scavenged at Edwards and took Rick and Mike for a wild ride onto orbit. They didn't have an airlock or suits, but her makeshift transport fit into the Arion's cargo bay. They've since figured out how to pilot and navigate the stealth-ship, thanks to the ship being highly automated with an AI system that bordered on sentient. Anja had convinced the former Captain to command the AI to accept me as the new captain as the price for letting he and his crew escape Earth in their lifeboat. The fact that they navigated toward Saturn's rings was ominous, but not immediately threatening.

She loaded the ship up with enough food and supplies to last a couple of years. Everything else on the ship, from the antimatter core to things like air and water were nearly inexhaustible. It even had an artificial gravity system that can resist heavy acceleration. More importantly, it can protect the crew from the gravity distortions during wormhole entries. Rick reprogrammed its thresholds for human survivability.

The remaining obstacle was Velor's gravity, which is five times that of Earth. Fortunately the ship's AI said the trip will take more than a Terran year. More than enough time for them to work so pleasantly on Mike's mutagenic transformation. Anja claims he'll be dancing on tip-toes in the quintupled gravity by the time they get there.

To be honest, Mike's been doing that ever since he realized he was going on a wormhole-diving interstellar voyage with his beautiful girlfriend, Anja.

Sometimes dreams really do come true.

The End

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