

First Protector

Book Two: Odyssey of Hope

By Brantley, with input and advice from Shadar

Book Two of Three in the story of the end of one era and the beginning of another in the history of the Aurora Universe.

Part One: Desperate Journey

Chapter One

No time to think, only to act, on the spur of the moment. I wouldn't have a second chance if I lingered on Tazzi. I took off, straight up; I had to get out of sight and out of range of Enemy forces, before they learned of Mal'kar's death.

Only when I reached space could I take thought, but it was hard to think straight, because I had been consumed by rage. I wanted to kill that bastard Gazrall. I wanted to kill that bitch Jana. I almost wanted to kill myself for letting myself be violated by Mal'kar – that's how I felt: *violated*. It was horror, but also shame – the worst shame I could imagine. My rage had served me well in dealing with him, but it was something I knew I had to put behind me. The mission came first. I owed that to Kevin...

The mission. I knew the Aureans had a ship in the system, with its own GAR, but I didn't have any idea where, or how long it would take word to reach them by radio; but they'd be ordered to hunt me down. And they could accelerate faster than a Scalantran ship; even the Betans could take much higher Gs than Scalantrans or humans. They'd hope to intercept me before I reached the wormhole – not likely, but if they missed me here, they could follow me to Madstop and attack me there, or even target the *Margin of Profit* if I made it onto the ship on time. I might be throwing away my life and the lives of everyone aboard.

There was only one thing to do: change course for the Selene wormhole – the more dangerous one. I was far enough away that nobody was likely to spot me if I made that turn, and already going too fast for anyone to get a bead on me. But that meant I couldn't make a tight turn. I was going to lose time, changing my vector. Not much, but every moment might count. It was going to be close; I had to make it to Selene in time to catch the *Boundless Opportunity*. That was my only chance – and the only chance for Tazzi.

I still felt the anger and hurt from what had happened there. I had betrayed Kevin, a good man who hadn't deserved his fate, whose only concern had been for his planet. Nuked, along with hundreds of innocents, at a commune. How Mar'kal had found out where he was, he'd never told – even on the point of his own death at my hands. It had to have been Jana, I thought – who else would have known where he was?

As I put distance between myself and Tazzi. I could begin to think more calmly. That confirmed the wisdom of my instant decision. Madstop was where Mar'kal would have told Gazrall I'd be heading, and Gazrall would have told the Aureans. I'd wanted to play it safe when I'd chosen that option – just in case. They might already be waiting at the Madstop wormhole, if they'd learned about Mal'kar.

Forget about Mal'kar, I told myself now. I knew there was only one way to honor Kevin's memory. I wasn't a Believer, yet I prayed to Skietra just the same – that I would reach the wormhole in time, get through it in time, arrive at Selene in time... neither rage nor prayers could bring Kevin back, or be of any use to avenging him.

I knew what to look for, even though I'd never seen a wormhole, let alone been through one – other than safely within the Scalantran ship that had brought me to Tazzi.

Wormhole physics had been part of my studies back at the Academy. It was important for us to know about wormholes, not just from a scientific standpoint but to understand and appreciate the universe we lived in – a universe where it was possible to travel from star to star in a year or two, rather than decades or even centuries or millennia.

Where it was possible to have interstellar empires and interstellar wars...

I avoided any close encounters with the insystem ships that served the off-planet mining operations. There hadn't been any Scalantrans – their next visit wasn't due for a year and, in any case, their ship would be going the wrong way... if they were even allowed to leave, their kind having been declared enemies of the State. Three days out at top acceleration, and the entry beacons were coming into view. I could read them easily with my enhanced vision, even at the speed I was traveling.

The wormhole was in stable phase – thank Skietra. I knew my course, the vector that would lead me to Selene.

What I didn't know was how painful it would be. Few Velorians had any real understanding of pain, having felt it so rarely. But I was now an exception, and the experience of that exception was fresh in my memory. I first felt a dull ache, a sensation of tiredness, as I imagined I might feel if I had spent the day moving a mountain. Then it was if someone were pulling on my arms and legs. I knew it must be an effect of the gravitational tides.

Then the heat, and the burning. Like...

I was right to have had Kevin test the GAR on me, I thought. I had to know what I could take. I owed him for that. I'd always owe him. I'd owe him for having tested me to the limit, and for having refused to go any further. I'd owe him for the idea of extracting the GAR control chips, for making my mission possible...

Before long, it hurt too terribly for me to think that clearly. But I could still fly; I knew deep down that I was on the right vector. There was nothing but the excruciating pain – and my determination to endure and get past it. And in the end, it wasn't as excruciating as with the GAR, after all – not quite, or I'd indeed never have made it. But I still might not have made it, if I hadn't known that I'd endured worse.

In the back of my mind, in spite of the agony, I knew the fate of countless billions of Terrans were depending on me, even if they didn't know it. The Scalantrans, too, were

depending on me, although they too couldn't know it. And Velor itself. I couldn't see any of their stars from here, in the narrow passage marked by the beacons. But they were there, and their worlds mattered, and the people on those worlds mattered... just as Kevin had mattered. That knowledge, too, helped see me through...

Finally, suddenly, the unfathomable darkness of the wormhole lifted and the stars in their myriads blazed before me in all their glory. The pain left me and I was overcome by a sense of freedom. I could see Selene's sun in the distance, and I knew I'd reach the planet in plenty of time to catch the *Boundless Opportunity*.

Within me, I felt the Vendorian steel tube and its precious chips. I sensed that they too had survived. Only, what was I going to tell the Scalantrans? Would they trust me if I told the entire truth, the truth that was so shameful to me? If I failed to make the right impression on Bensalem, from the very start, I'd never have a second chance. Kevin was coming to my aid, even in death. He'd shared the two Scalantran messages about the GAR intercepted by Gazrall's people – that would give me an advantage, both in the knowledge itself and the fact that Selene's factor general would not take kindly to Gazrall's having breached Scalantran security. For that reason alone, Bensalem might be willing to overlook the fact that I was in violation of my contract with Gazrall.

Breaking indenture had previously been accepted by the Scalantrans, I knew, but in that case Ju'lette had saved the *Far Wanderer* from the Aureans. It was too great a debt to go unpaid, just as my own debt to Kevin was too great to go unpaid. And yet Ju'lette had ultimately failed to win over the High Council or the Senate, even with the Tanzrobians there to bear witness to the use of the light GAR on their planet.

It was smooth flying now, and yet I was weary, not only from the wormhole passage but from the racing of my mind. I had to come up with something tellable about the Aurean involvement on Tazzi that didn't involve me personally. I'd have to convince Bensalem of the importance of my mission; how much more important the heavy GAR was than a simple matter of trade or a TIO. I'd have to scare him out of his wits, and arouse his anger towards the Empire, without ever showing any sign of weakness on my own part.

And once I'd convinced him, I'd still have to convince Velor. What Tazzi and other planets faced now was far direr, than anything that had befallen Nova Iberia or Tanzrobi – too terrible to contemplate – yet I would have to make the High Council contemplate it.

There was one card I could play that I hadn't expected to have just a few days ago: Like Ju'lette, I could justify breaking my indenture under the Exception. If Gazrall hadn't shown his hand, I might have been taken for a deserter.

But now I would be bringing the GAR chips *and* the knowledge that the enemy had taken control of the world I'd fled in all but name. The High Council would have to listen to me. But to reach them, I would have to reach Velor, and for that I had to reach Bensalem. First things first, although I knew that would be only the beginning.

Chapter Two

Naked I came into the world, and naked I had come out of the wormhole. I might have landed far from Novy Kyiv, and found something to wear into the capital. But time might be of the essence, so I decided to make a grand entrance.

It was grand, all right, but turned out to be an embarrassment. I'd heard that Selene was a modern, industrialized planet, much like Tazzi – and so I assumed that its manners and mores would be much the same.

The first man to spot me called out to others in the street.

“Smotritye, v nebye! Eto ptitsa! Eto samolyet! Nyet, eto zhenshina! Golaya zhenshina! Goliye letayushei zhenshinish! Eto dolzhna byt Veloryet.”

I didn't know any Russian. It was only later that I learned that from far below he'd mistaken me at first for a bird or an airplane, but finally realized I was a flying woman – and there was only one kind of flying woman in the universe... Nobody here knew just who I was, and nobody back on Tazzi or anywhere else knew I was here. I wanted to keep it that way, which meant I had to make contact as soon as possible with somebody who could understand – and help.

I came in for a landing in what appeared to be the central plaza of Novy Kyiv, much like Cathedral Square back in New London. A huge building on one side had towers with peculiar-looking domes topped by crosses; it was obviously still in use for its original purpose. Three ornate buildings on other sides, from which flew flags, I took to be government offices.

There were hundreds of people about, within a few seconds they were gawking at me – men and women alike. Only the men were blushing, even though they couldn't take

their eyes off me, while the women frowned – or simply turned away. Traffic in the plaza came to a dead stop as the Novy Kyivans milled about, the crowd growing by the moment as curious people emerged from the buildings to see what all the fuss was about.

I had to make contact – but I hadn't dared arouse suspicion on Tazzi by seeking deepteach in Russian. I'd decided to improvise enough from a phrase book to – hopefully – get by. The first thing was to try to find somebody who spoke my adopted language.

"Lyuboi zdyes govorit po-angliiski?" I shouted at the top of a human voice to one and all. "Ya rodom iz Tazzi."

Surprisingly, it was a woman, emerging from the government building across from the cathedral, who responded.

"Propustitye menya, pozhalusta!" she yelled at the crowd around me

Everyone else still appeared to be showing confusion and/or outrage, but this woman seemed to know what she was about as she worked her way towards me. She conveyed an air of importance; perhaps she was well known in the city. At any rate, the crowd parted to make way for her.

When she reached me, she gave me a frank look.

"I speak... some English. We do business, offworld."

I nodded.

"Best to get from street. Not to cause riot. We take my ground car."

Best indeed, I thought.

First contact. The rest to follow, if things went well...

The car was as modern as the buildings and dress of the Kyivans was traditional – including that of the woman's driver, who studiously ignored the nudity of his new passenger."

"Just come from export license meeting at Ministry," the woman said. "Lucky I be there for you. Most not understand about Velorians. Even Companions here not often seen."

A few minutes later, we reached our destination, an office building of stone and brick in an elaborate decorative pattern, and I followed the richly dressed woman inside, where they took an elevator to the third floor. The sign on door of her place of business

was in the local language, of which I knew only a few phrases – I couldn't make it out, but I hoped it was the right place to bring my message.

Адвокатское бюро Губина

Иностранные коммерческой деятельности

It was a law office representing companies that traded off-world, I was soon to learn.

The woman led me into the suite and down a corridor, past the offices of fellow workers, paying no attention to their startled reactions, and motioned me into her private office.

She remained standing for a moment against a decorative screen as she introduced herself.

“My name Mayra Gubin. Partner in this bureau, which supply advice on dealings with Scalantrans. I see you Velorian, but not one belong here. That confuse people in street. Two of our commersants have Companions. You be neither. Please to explain.”

“I am Vespvr Tal'esta. I have come here to Selene to report a dire emergency, one that you cannot imagine, but which threatens the survival of all civilized worlds – including yours. I will explain to you, and to the Scalantrans here, and I must then find passage on the *Boundless Opportunity* to Velor, in order to inform the Senate about the very same emergency.”

“You have credit with Scalantrans, or Velor?”

I could only shake my head.

She frowned.

“And how you propose to pay passage?”

“By saving the Scalantrans from destruction.”

I tried to look as earnest as possible, which indeed is what I was. Was I getting through to her?

Mayra stood there for a moment, apparently trying to take it all in, then broke into a slight smile.



“You have obviously violated Scalantran contract, leaving Tazzi. You make spectacle of self on arrival, and expect us believe destruction awaits if we not do as you tell. Your story absurd. So absurd as to command belief.”

I couldn't conceal my relief, and I could see by Mayra's expression that she could tell that.

“To begin at beginning, how came you here?”

“I flew. Through the wormhole.”

Mayra's jaw dropped.

“And I am not in violation of my contract. I discovered that its holder was in league with the Aureans.”

Mayra looked at me gravely.

“Must take you see Rurik.”

Rurik Gubin was the senior partner of the firm. Also her father. Did enterprises here on Selene all run in the family?

But before they could meet, Mayra had to find something for me to wear, sending out for a linen gown similar to hers. In fact, it was one of her own – only green. It fit more tightly over my chest, but there was no helping that. It was only then that I thought to correct her impression that I was a contract breaker.

“Natural error,” she commented.

“I agree. I’ll explain it all.”

* * *

Mayra escorted me to a conference room, where Rurik awaited. His hair and beard were red, the first I’d seen here, although beards seemed to be the custom on Selene. It turned out that he had better command of English than his daughter. For some reason, people in his family had a tradition of learning foreign languages the hard way, rather than by deepteach. He heard me out patiently, never interrupting me with questions or comments.

When I finished, he showed his intelligence by asking first about the control and data chips for the GAR she carried.

“They’re your only hard evidence,” he said. “We should have the engineers at the Veliky plant examine the chips closely, and make copies if possible. You may return to Mayra’s office to retrieve them.”

Rurik was putting it politely; I’d made it clear, without dwelling on it, that I’d carried them internally.

I understood and returned to Mayra’s office, retiring behind the screen there to lift up my gown and, carefully – *very carefully* – remove the Vendorian steel tube with its chips from my vagina, praying that indeed they had not been damaged. They had been given the best protection a Velorian could give.

Rurik explained where we were going next. His firm handled export contracts with the Scalantrans for a company called Veliky Vagon Tvorets.

“They produce advanced technology for export, including mining equipment for Madstop. Their engineers are also familiar with Vendorian steel. Perhaps they could open your container more safely than you could be by hand.”

“I understand. But I can’t let it or the chips out of my sight. It’s my responsibility.”

“Agreed.”

* * *

The engineers at Veliky Vagon Tvorets were impressed by the chips, once they’d opened the tube and had a chance to scan them.

“Ochen moshny,” the first said.

“Ochen pugayet,” the second added.

“Opredeleanno Ariiskoi proizvodstva,” replied the first.

“Very powerful. Very frightening,” Rurik translated. “Definitely Aurean-made.”

Vladimir Sokolnikov was the elder, head of the department that produced mining platforms for Madstop – which had to withstand extreme heat in order for the men of that hellish planet to retrieve the precious flame jewels that brought them wealth, if not exactly security. He was in his 60’s, I judged, rather stout, his hair and beard going white. Yet he was in full command of his faculties and, like Rurik, avoided any outward expression of interest in me as a woman.

Igor Voinov was what they called an “aspirant,” learning on the job after receiving a basic education. Early 20’s, his hair and beard coal black. But neither his facial hair nor his attention to the business at hand could conceal the longing in his expression – a longing he must imagine was hopeless.

The only Velorians he could know of were the Companions here, and they were far, far beyond reach – let alone touch. He must have heard tell of Velorians’ powers. But could he know, right this moment, that I could see what strained against his pants, and that I *wanted* it? I was ashamed to want it, though it was my very nature as Velorian to want it. I had betrayed Kevin; I felt I no longer deserved pleasure – but now my body was betraying me. Only I had to appear calm, to focus on the discussion at hand.

“You can see why the Scalantrans will want to cooperate,” I said. “They know only of the hand-carried version of the GAR. What we found on Tazzi is a ship killer, perhaps even a planet killer.”

Rurik translated that, and Vladimir’s response.

“You have good cause for alarm; we had heard of nothing like this before, and the Scalantrans indeed must indeed be warned. Their ships will be as vulnerable as the

Admiral Kirkland. We shall of course add our voice to yours in this matter. We would also like to make copies of the chips. Further research would be helpful. We might even find some clues in the basic programming as to how to counter this weapon.”

“You may do so, provided it doesn’t risk any damage,” I cautioned.

I couldn’t understand the annoyance on Vladimir’s face as he grunted a response.

“Everyone knows that Veliky Vagon Tvorets can be trusted,” Rurik explained. “I shall tell him you are ignorant, and meant no disrespect.”

* * *

It turned out that their engineers, while they couldn’t speak English, were, like Rurik, fluent in Scalantran. Bensalem could speak Rus, of course; that was required of him as Factor General for Selene. But as a courtesy to him, and in view of the gravity of the situation, they all agreed to use Scalantran, with Rurik translating and from and to my English whenever I needed to give my first-hand account and be informed of the reactions of the Factor General and the engineers to whatever the Factor General had to say.

I couldn’t tell the difference between him and his counterpart Vaharem on Tazzi. It had been a long time since I had seen Vaharem up close – Gazrall rarely had direct dealings with him – and even longer since I’d shared the company of the Scalantrans on the *Hopeful Trader*. It was strange being the center of conversation rather than only of attention at Bensalem’s office near the spaceport.

It got off to a rough start, although I didn’t realize it at the time. I had cause to regret that I had never learned Scalantran, or how to pick up Scalantran body language, and it was only after our meeting that I learned Bensalem had been in a bad mood: it seemed that we have interrupted a private time between him and his one-mate, and that it had been only Rurik’s insistence that there was a dire emergency that had brought him to the conference room.

Rurik began by introducing me, explaining who I was and where I came from, and that I had first-hand knowledge of an Aurean presence on Tazzi and likewise first-hand knowledge a new Aurean weapon terrible beyond anything he could imagine that threatened every civilized world and his own people. That got his attention, for his response was curt and yet encouraging.

“He says, ‘You may proceed now,’” Rurik translated.

So I proceeded. I didn't exactly tell the truth. Nothing about Kevin, and not even a hint about a Prime. I told Bensalem that I had discovered Gazrall's Chief Armorer was in fact an Aurean Beta, and that the Empire had not only supplied a working heavy GAR but intended to produce more of them on Tazzi, which could then use them to conquer planets in neighboring systems and establish a satrapy tributary to Aurea. The heavy GARs would also be used to destroy Scalantran ships and cripple interstellar trade. By sleight of tongue, I managed to work in doctored versions of the *Admiral Kirkland* affair, and even the test on myself, in graphic detail. I also told him how the Chief Armorer had intercepted and translated Scalantran message traffic reaching Tazzi, and that he had been pleased to learn that the Scalantrans had been playing into Aurean hands – and about the detention of Vaharem and his mate group.

That really startled Bensalem.

As I said, it wasn't entirely the truth. But it was true enough to the Aurean threat, and what that meant to Terrans and Scalantrans alike. It was the truth that Bensalem needed to hear, and act on. I had already told it to Rurik, and he had come prepared with a printed version of the key points of my account, a copy of which he handed to the Factor General.

Rurik made his own remarks, about how credible my account had been, and then it was Vladimir's turn to brief Bensalem on his firm's analysis of the GAR chips. Rurik had made printed copies of both testimonies, and handed them over, along with copies of the chips themselves. I had no way to judge Bensalem's reaction to all that, but he had questions for Rurik and Vladimir, mostly to do with legal and technical matters, I was later told. He had finished with the others, he had only one question for me.

"How did you feel when they tested the GAR on you?" Rurik interpreted.

"Like I was going to die."

Bensalem was silent for several moments after hearing the translation. Then he turned to Rurik and couldn't seem to stop talking. *I can read that*, I thought at the time, and I was right.

* * *

"He's convinced," Rurik told me afterwards. "He now suspects the Aureans may have been playing a trick on them by allowing them to find out about the smaller version

of the GAR, the kind that was used on Gebron and Tanzrobi. Filing for Trade Intellectual Ownership could be considered an act of war. The Empire has denied responsibility for the attack on the *Far Wanderer* and Nova Iberia, insisting it was a rogue operation.”

“A likely story,” I commented.

“Bensalem never believed it, either, and he’s terribly frightened by your account of the heavy GAR – and the Aurean presence on Tazzi. And the arrests of our people there. As we speak, he is drafting an updated general advisory urging that any attempt to file for a TIO, no matter how great the potential profits, be abandoned forthwith. That should get the message out. It will take time for it to get around, but it *will* get around.”

“Now I have to take the same message to Velor.”

“Bensalem has seen to your passage. The fact that you departed Tazzi under the Exception made it easier for him, although I’m sure he would have made a case for you in any event. But that will remain a secret. As will the details about Aurean involvement on Tazzi.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The official story is that you will return whence you came to aid our people there. That is referred to in the general advisory, and will therefore be believed. It will be believed here, as well, in the off chance there are any local Aurean agents – although I think the chances of that are slim. Traffic control into our system is very tight, and the Companions have instructions from Velor to cooperate in any security operations necessary to deal with agents of the Empire. You’ll be staying with us until you can catch a ship back home. Part of the art of war, and this is a war, is the art of deception.”

I nodded.

“Another part of the art of war is the war of words. I’ve also persuaded Bensalem that it is in the best interests of the Scalantrans that you be deeptaught in their own language.”

“The travel captains and trade captains speak Velorian.”

“But there are many Scalantrans who don’t; most of their ships don’t even call on Velor, and then there are the meetpoints and youthworlds, the only places where they can meet and share news with the crews of those which do.”

“Outsiders aren’t supposed to visit those, or even know where they are,” I said. “I managed to find out a bit of it aboard the *Hopeful Trader*, perhaps because I expressed such an interest in cosmology and galactic history.”

“But your voice could reach them. You could make recordings about what you have learned, to be shared with Scalantrans everywhere. To see you with their own eyes, to hear you speak in their own language... That is what I told Bensalem.”

“I see.”

“But I left one thing out: *intelligence*. What do they know that we don’t know? You might just overhear something...”

Chapter Three

And so it came to pass that, wearing the same borrowed green gown but with a hooded cloak as further disguise, I stepped aboard the *Boundless Opportunity*. I had papers that identified me as Mayra’s sister Olga; but Bensalem had informed the travel captain of my actual identity in a coded message. His message also requested that I be deeptaught Scalantran to spread word about what they were all facing.

The travel captain’s name was Manesha; like other Scalantran females she had ears that were rounder on top, with the lobes slightly longer than those of males. Her nasal openings were likewise smaller and more oval in shape. She told me right off how Bensalem had won her over: then saw me to my quarters, where a deepteach machine had already been set up. She explained to me how to use it, then went back to her duties without further ado.

I didn’t see Manesha again for some months of real time; instead I was handed back to the historian Kinyam, who worked with me on mastering what seemed at first a mere jumble of words that had poured into my mind. It took time, but I finally got the hang of it, and was relieved to know that I need no longer be a stranger to anyone here, but could share my thoughts with any Scalantrans who wished to. In turn, I might even learn something that would be of use to her mission...

There hadn’t been an official send-off, for obvious reasons. But I came aboard with warm memories of the previous night. I had been feeling lonely, and imagined that I had

nothing to look forward to but more loneliness until I reached her home – my real home. But my benefactor had something else in mind.

“Before you leave, I have a parting gift for you, and for Igor,” Rurik said.

“I don’t understand.”

He drew forth a necklace of gold.

“Igor awaits you at the Dnyepri Inn, his private quarters being... inadequate to the occasion.”

“But— “

“Public displays of affection are frowned upon on Selene. Private displays are quite a different matter. I could see that Igor was struggling to conceal his desire for you, and he has no other attachments at the present time. So I had a discussion with Vladimir, and he agreed that you two should spend some pleasurable time together.”

“You didn’t discuss it with me!”

“Would there have been any need to? We know about Velorians, and the manner of your first appearance in the Central Square testifies to your own shamelessness. You were obviously inviting lust in public, and while the nature of your mission indeed called for a spectacular entrance, it offended traditional sensibilities here. It was only because my daughter rightly suspected that must have come on urgent business that she was willing to bring you in.”

“I see,” I told him. And I did. I could hardly beg off. I hadn’t told them anything about Kevin; I hadn’t even mentioned his name in my report. It would seem inexplicable, not to mention undiplomatic, for me to show any reluctance. And I truly didn’t feel any. I needed it. I was a Velorian and I *needed* it. I especially needed it to help me distance myself from the memory of Mal’kar...

“Here are directions to the inn,” Rurik said, handing me a paper. “You will find Igor in Room 117. Here are a few Russian phrases that may prove helpful, as his English is not as good as mine or Vladimir’s.”

I found the room easily enough. It held a large a bed, which I hoped was sturdy. And it held Igor, whose face was filled with wonder as well as longing when I entered. I could see his erection straining against his pants, and smiled at him as I directed my gaze

there. I removed my gown, and he arose and stripped of his tunic and pants – he wore nothing beneath them.

I was naked but for my necklace. He must know what *that* was for, and his cock twitched. But he looked at my gold only for a second; then his eyes were riveted on my breasts.

I could see and practically feel Igor's own aching need, and I felt the same need. I approached him boldly, took his hands and placed them where I knew he wanted them – on my breasts. He squeezed them, marveling at their firmness, then stroked them, and my nipples stiffened at his touch. With my left hand, I stroked his hair, and brought his face to mine, kissing him gently. With my right, I caressed his cock. Then I broke away, but only to lie down on the bed, with open arms and legs.

"Lezhi s mnoi," I invited him. *Lie with me.*

In a moment, he was on me, and in me, pounding me into the bed. I thrilled to the feel of him, my wetness easing his passage as his manhood triggered all my pleasure centers. Faster, deeper, harder! It felt so good. I bucked to meet his thrusts. It couldn't last long; he was too excited. But he cried with joy as he came, and so did I.

I knew he'd be up for another round... several more rounds. He wasn't Kevin, but Igor was what I needed just then: raw sex without complications. No hidden agenda, no political motivations, just the act itself. The *goodness* of it. That, and the feeling of being in control of my life again, the feeling of being a *Velorian*. Igor couldn't imagine how much it meant to me; to him Velorians were goddesses – invulnerable but unattainable. What befell me on Tazzi had left me feeling very vulnerable, and even ashamed. But here, I could feel my old self come back to life.

If Igor had thought it was all over after he came, I quickly disabused him. I kissed him on the lips again, then surprised him my changing position so that I could kiss his cock, which sprang back to life. That wasn't one of the things Rurik anticipated in his phrase list, but I decided to forget about spoken as opposed to body language. I laid him on his back, then mounted him.

As I took him into me, I pressed my hands to my breasts, and beckoned him to do likewise, and the pressure of his hands against them was heavenly. As I rode him to

another orgasm, I bared my teeth; he took the hint, and bit my nipples hard – knowing he couldn't possibly harm them. I exploded with joy, and he exploded a moment later.

It meant so much to have a *good* man beside me, *inside* me...



What else would he be up for? I pointed between my legs and snacked my lips; he didn't hesitate for a moment before burying his face down there, licking my nether lips and lapping up my juices that flowed abundantly. Had he heard about the Velorian scent of honey and wildflowers, or was he discovering it for himself? Whatever the case, he loved it – he wasn't faking.

There were a lot of Terran men who didn't go for that sort of thing, at least with Terran women, but Igor couldn't himself back. And then he went to work on my clit, sucking it and then biting it with wild abandon; I came again, hard, and screamed with joy. When he raised his head afterwards I could see the pride on his face – the pride of having pleased a woman he knew other men like himself could only have dreamed of. I was giving him the greatest gift a Velorian could bestow.

Turnabout is fair play, but it startled him when I signaled that I wanted to return the favor. I proved it again now with Igor as, ever so gently, I took him into my mouth, licking and sucking him into another orgasm. It didn't do anything for me, although I made it seem as if it had. But sex is about giving as well as receiving, and it felt good to be on the giving end. I had forgotten that on Tazzi, to my ultimate cost, but it came back to me now and my training as a Companion saw me through.

We went through a few more rounds before Igor was completely exhausted. All he wanted after that was sleep, but I held his hand and kissed him again before taking my leave. When he had come, he'd yelled words in Russian that I couldn't understand, but at our parting he had only one.

"Boginya," he whispered.

I learned the next morning from Rurik that "boginya" meant "goddess." He also informed me that our close encounter had accomplished more than I realized.

"Vladimir says it's also heightened Igor's interest in his work," Rurik told me.

"His work?"

"He's been assigned to the company's GAR research. Sometimes it's the young men who come up with the freshest ideas."

So there was a hidden agenda, after all. But it was one that served the interests of Velor and the Terran diaspora and the Scalantrans.

Rurik saw me off to the *Boundless Opportunity*. He saw the glow on my face, and couldn't hide a smirk, knowing how I had spent the previous night. But he couldn't know, and I wasn't about to tell him, how much it had done for me beyond the success of that hidden agenda – how it had helped restore my very soul. I felt that Kevin would have understood. He'd been that kind of man.

* * *

I treasured the memory of Igor, for what it meant to me in overcoming the trauma I had endured on Tazzi. Yet I had to focus on the future. What was happening on Velor? Why had that message crystal – sent from by High Council – also contained a second message about the testimony of Ju'lette and the Tanzrobian? Was there some sort of dispute within the High Council, or between the Council and the Senate – or was it just a matter of the left hand not knowing what the right was doing?

I'd never find out until I reached home.

Meanwhile, between language practice sessions with Kinyam, I was reading up on Scalantran history. I hadn't bothered asking about that much on the way out from Velor with the other Companions all those years ago. They'd talked among themselves, about what kind of luck they'd have with their indentures – I hoped now that the others had fared better than me.

It was all pretty hard to follow, but one thing which stood out was that the trade routes were apparently more complicated than they'd been in centuries past. In the early days, a ship would have exclusive rights to a planet as well as its exports; but as the markets for those products grew, the original ships couldn't visit all the worlds that sought them, so arrangements were made to share some routes – with the original ship receiving a percentage of the profits from products already traded. That increased the pressure for ships without first rights to find products on which they could file TIOs and keep the profits.

There had been a tiny but growing passenger traffic ever since the introduction of Vendorian steel for starship construction. That was how Gazrall had made it to Tazzi. And there was the equally tiny but growing number of Adopts, like Kevin's father – I didn't have any idea where he had come from. It was the same with the holder of my indenture, with the further mystery of how he came by his wealth. There was nothing in the records available on my ship bearing on any of that.

But there was plenty about Seeded worlds. Scalantrans share information about them at Meetpoints. I'd heard about those at the Academy, of course, but never in any great detail. Because I was a Companion-in-training, I knew about the history of the Companions, including the very first – Kalla Zaver'el, who had served on Andros for more than 300 Terran years, as an advisor to its patriarchs, the planetary synod and sundry educational and business institutions even after her indenture had expired.

She was famed on Velor for having defeated an Aurean invasion of the planet a century and a half ago. But, reading the details now, I realized that she couldn't have brought that off single-handed. From her very arrival, she had fostered a scientific and industrial revolution there that eventually led her adopted world into the space age. The enemy had seen only plunder for the taking on Andros; they hadn't foreseen warships that could take them out – or the mere Terrans trained to fly them and take the fight to the invaders at the Battle of the Triple Moons.

Since then, the Aureans had sought easier conquests, like Nova Iberia, where Ju'lette had served.

Only with the heavy GAR...

I told Kinyam about that, about how Tazzi might be the test of a new strategy by the Empire. About how Gazrall, for all I knew, might be a pawn in an interstellar chess game.

“More than a pawn, I suspect,” Kinyam responded. “Did it ever occur to you that it was awfully convenient for that Aurean scout ship to crash on his planet and leave the GAR available for study?”

It must have been sheer coincidence that her seemingly paranoid thoughts came close to the story I’d told Bensalem, and to the actual truth behind it. But Bensalem was trying to limit any panic, by stripping his account of some of the more shocking details, so I decided to play the skeptic.

“The thing is, he *did* seem to fear the Aureans. And if I hadn’t been available after the *Admiral Kirkland* fiasco, he could never have gotten anywhere with it.”

“Perhaps he anticipated that you’d have reason to. Perhaps it was for just such a contingency that he acquired a Velorian.”

“You give him too much credit, and far too much foresight. He wanted me for show. Just another sign of his wealth, if not of his manhood.”

“I think you said you don’t know where he came from, or how his father and he came by their wealth in the first place.”

“He never talked about Karl with me, or anyone I knew. But he must have come from a world where it was possible to accumulate such wealth. One as advanced as Tazzi or Selene or Andros.”

“Do you know what ship he and Salomon arrived on?”

“He never talked about that, either. I would never have thought to ask, in any case. It was none of my business as his Companion, and I wouldn’t have thought it of any importance at the time.”

“It could be extremely important now. Perhaps I could help. I could put out inquiries. There aren’t that many humans who have taken passage on Scalantran ships.”

“Why would you be interested?”

“Because it may affect our interests, as well as Velor’s. And we need to get back in Velor’s good graces.”

“But these inquiries...”

“Would take a great deal of time. I know. Too long to be of use to you. But perhaps in time to be of use to us.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said sarcastically.

“We have to look out for our own interests. Any way we can. And right now, it’s in our interest that you succeed. It’s just that we have to be prepared for any ... contingencies.

Contingencies. To the Scalantrans, I was a contingency. So be it.

* * *

By the time the *Boundless Opportunity* approached its first jump, I was a familiar figure. I could speak frankly with Trade Captain Farishan about the Companion trade – like the rest of the crew, he had been briefed about my mission.

Training for combat, he said, was even more intense than it had been when I’d gone through the Academy, and nobody pretended any longer that it was only for the protection of the men who would purchase their indentures.

“But this business of the heavy GAR – that’s *scary*.”

“Scary even to me,” I told him.

There was nothing at all scary about the wormhole passage. It was routine, I was safely within the protective walls of the ship.

Chapter Four

There was disturbing news at the ship’s first stop, and what I learned there right off made me all the more impatient to reach Velor. But business was still business, and there would be a layover of three days for a trade fair.

The planet was called Trpcic, and it had been seeded with a mix of Slavic people from somewhere in Europe – east of the Holy Roman Empire, they told me, which told me nothing. The language was related to the Rus of Selene, but I was advised that I’d have had trouble following it even if I’d taken deepteach in Novy Kyiv.

Not that it mattered. The news had come from Jossalem, resident factor for the planet. It seemed that the Velorian High Council was angry with the Scalantrans. It was insisting on higher down payments for Companions – and having all outgoing ships thoroughly inspected.

It was supposedly all Ju'lette's doing.

The Scalantrans of the *Galactic Roamer*, which, unlike the *Far Wanderer* had a regular trade with Velor, had permitted her to ship out with them in the company of a man from Andros she'd taken a fancy to – and who had, they said, somehow acquired Velorian powers. Not only that, but the ship had also taken Tol'or, an instructor at the Academy on Erin'lah, who deserted his post for the love of the Tanzrobian Zanele.

Galactic Roamer Travel Captain Kordovom had considered it a matter of honor, given that Ju'lette had saved the *Far Wanderer* from the Aureans – and that Zanele had helped save the *Spirit of Youth*. The High Council had seen it differently, as conniving in treason.

Opara, the Factor General on Erin'lah, had been caught in the middle. And the *Far Wanderer* had served as a scapegoat for the Council's wrath, since it had brought Ju'lette to the Velorian system in the first place, and traded with Andros – which had angered the High Council two centuries ago by opposing imposition of additional Companions and encouraging other worlds to do likewise. The High Council had a long collective memory, and Andros had later shamed Velor by defeating an Aurean invasion under the leadership of the freed Companion Kalla.

Although the *Far Wanderer* was running late on its trade route because of the unauthorized stop at Erin'lah and all the trouble that followed. Travel Captain Marpolom had decided to make another unauthorized stop at Trpcic to begin spreading word to as many other trade circuits as possible, in hopes of rallying support from their ships that could eventually lead to a united front.

As if the Scalantrans didn't have enough trouble already! Only that wasn't what jumped out at me. It was the matter of Ju'lette's lover. That hadn't been mentioned in either of the messages that reached me on Tazzi. Unlike the rest of Marpolom's account, it was unbelievable – and inexplicable.

Could it have something to do with the Galen? But why would the Galen do a personal favor for Ju'lette? Her lover, Tassos by name, had been a "lottery boy," like my own François decades ago, selected by chance from men of each world willing to risk themselves as test subjects for Companions in training. Yet there had been thousands upon thousands of lottery boys over the centuries – from Andros and who knew how many

other planets. It just didn't make sense that he would be singled out by the Galen, or even noticed by them – assuming that the Galen had any business on a second-generation seeded world in the first place.

None of that mattered to Jossalem. He was *unattached*, meaning that he wasn't allowed to have a mate, let alone a mate group. I didn't ask how he had come by such a dubious honor and such a small post; it seemed likely that it was punishment. Trpcic itself was a minor planet with a small population and small interstellar trade. Nobody here could afford a Companion.

I told him about my meeting with Bensalem, and he had his own take on the whole TIO thing.

"I once studied under Tithzarem on my youthworld," he said. "The man was old and doddering even then. His title is strictly an honorary one for retirees who have been involved in education on youthworlds, but it seems to have gone to his head."

I just nodded. It was Tithzarem who had first spread word about the new weapon to his fellow Scalantrans – and seen it as a business opportunity. It had all begun with him, and that was the reason I was here.

"We have enough trouble with the Aureans as it is," Jossalem continued. "And what you call the heavy GAR – I can't understand what this Gazrall hoped to gain from it."

"Selling it to other worlds, I would imagine. With or without the cooperation of the Aureans. I'm not sure which. But his hands are dirty, that's for certain."

"Nobody would care terribly if the Aureans moved in here," he complained.

It was disturbing to hear a Scalantran say something so bitter, or to appear to be so resigned to it. It must have to do with his seeming disgrace as much as with the attitude of the natives here, but I wasn't going to pursue that.

I didn't try to reassure him that the Aureans wouldn't consider his world worth the bother; that would have been tactless. I could have said a good deal more, but that would have meant getting onto the personal details.

Mercifully, Jossalem didn't seem to show any interest in that sort of thing, but just in case, I steered the conversation back to Ju'lette, and the advisories sent to the

Companions that had reached me on Tazzi. It can't have meant much to him; I was just thinking out loud.

"And finally there's whoever sent that second message to me and all the other Companions," I wound up. "The one unsigned and thus presumably unsanctioned by the High Council. He may be on our side, and perhaps he has allies of his own who at least have open minds."

I could tell none of this meant anything to him; I was wasting my breath.

At that point, we were interrupted by Farishan; something about sokols, whatever those were. Jossalem seemed relieved at the chance to be going about his own business instead of listening to mine. While the Factor was away dealing with whatever he was dealing with, I thought again about Gazrall.

Salomon was a common name; so was Karl. No help there. But I'd never heard of anyone else named Gazrall. Neither had anyone on the *Boundless Opportunity*. Nor had Jossalem; I'd asked him, just on the off chance.

"Farishan and I have worked things out," the Factor said when he got back from meeting with the trade captain and the merchants. "No more trouble about sokols and zubors..."

Sokols, it turned out, were hunting birds, apparently brought only to Trpcic by the Seeders. They were in demand on seeded worlds where the nobility set great store by hunting as a pastime, and an emblem of privilege. Commoners weren't allowed to hunt on the lands of the aristocracy, and nearly all the land belonged to the aristocracy. I knew a bit about aristocracy from the history of Tazzi, but the kind he talked about didn't have anything to do with a church. Anyway, the point was that the export market for the birds was limited to aristocracies.

"Sokols, like any birds can breed quickly, so the merchants here know the market for them would vanish if they couldn't keep sending only males. But we agreed to handle breeding pairs of zubors – wild cattle that were rare on Earth and don't seem to have been brought anywhere else by the Seeders. One of their quirks."

"Oh," I said, not terribly interested. "And I suppose the sokols will be used to hunt the zubors?"

“Hardly. Zubors are too big and too slow for that kind of sport, although they can be dangerous, with their males’ huge horns. That’s where what aristocrats call the ‘sport’ comes in, hard as that may be for you and I to understand. The sokols are used to spot and track game that is more fleet of foot. Of that, this world has nothing to offer.”

Jossalem paused for a moment.

“Speaking of males, that man over there is the son of the trader who deals in both sokols and zubors.”

I glanced in the direction he indicated.

“We have told him that you are... unencumbered. As he indeed is. His name is Boleslav Zupan.”

“**Oh**,” I said, terribly interested.

And I realized how much I needed a break. I was more comfortable about my needs now; somehow, I had made my inner peace with the memory of Kevin. I still had a debt to pay him, but there was another way to pay it, and that now awaited me only at Velor...

If Scalantans were capable of smirking, I imagined, Jossalem would have done so. But he and Manesha could surely understand the irony of their humor of playing matchmakers to a Terran and a Velorian. And even providing protection – a gold necklace Farishan just “happened” to have brought from the ship, and which she took a break from the trade talks to bestow on me.

“He understands about that,” the trade captain said.

“And I think I can trust you *not* to do whatever Ju’lette did with Tassos,” added Jossalem.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Marpolom must have gotten that wrong. We *can’t* do what you say he told you about that man. The Galen made us what we are, out of ordinary Terrans, and only the Galen are capable of doing that.”

“Kordovom supposedly had it from Ju’lette herself.”

“And Marpolom had it only second-hand. Maybe the Velorians made it all up to justify making things harder for you. I don’t suppose they had any idea where Ju’lette went.”

“Word had it that she and Tassos were headed for Madstop.”

Skietra! Would the Aureans have found them there? Had I unwittingly put them in harm's way? But I couldn't let on, so I quickly turned it into a joke.

"A likely spot for a honeymoon. I think *I've* had it," I teased him.

* * *

What Boleslav lacked in experience he made up for in enthusiasm – and, of course, stamina. Like Igor, he didn't last long the first time, but I got off just the same; I let him know that he had nothing to be ashamed of. And he was a quick study...

For me, it was a diversion, a chance to take my mind off all the thoughts that had troubled me from the outset of my journey – thoughts that had nothing to do with Kevin, and which had been worsened by the news Jossalem had shared about developments on Velor. And there was something Boleslav told me that might bear on my mission – and on the fate of Tazzi, if fate allowed me to return there.

In our afterglow, he'd showed he had a sense of humor, and more. He could speak Scalantran, even if his words of passion had been in his native tongue.

"Do Velorian women have a man in every port?" he asked.

"Only if they're retired Companions. Like me."

That drew a blank stare. I had to explain about Companions; on a planet like this, people didn't know much about them, or have need to.

"Guess it'll have a long wait for the next time you hit Trpcic," he said.

"I'm sure you'll find other diversions, maybe even—"

"My father wants to choose for me. A business alliance. But I don't think I could abide it. I don't think love should be a matter of business, as it is with your indentures."

"It isn't that bad," I said, not very convincingly. "We live much longer away from home. Even 100 Terran years isn't much for us. And some of us even find love as Companions."

"I don't think you're one of them. Can you say you're sorry he died?"

He must have just *assumed* that – how else could a Companion be freed of her indenture? But for a second I was thinking about Kevin – so flustered that I corrected myself out loud.

"Died? Oh, you mean Gazrall."

Skietra! I wasn't supposed to have mentioned his name.

“Gazrall? The name sounds familiar.”

“You know about Tazzi?”

I shouldn’t have mentioned that, either, but somehow felt compelled.

“No. It’s just that I’ve heard that name or a similar one, only I can’t remember when. Maybe it was when I was a kid. Maybe it will come to me.”

But it didn’t. Not that night.

It left me frustrated, thinking of how little I had known about him back on Tazzi. The Scalantrans had prepared me for my indenture, and for the world itself, but not for *him*. Now I felt a gnawing anxiety about the chances of my mission – and a growing obsession about the man responsible for it all, a man I had once trusted if never truly loved, a man who even now might be bringing tyranny or destruction to an entire world...

* * *

At the time I left, my indenture to Salomon Gazrall had lasted for some 20 Terran years, the equivalent of 27 on Tazzi; yet I had felt a greater bond to my homeworld. Perhaps that wasn’t the same for all Companions – perhaps they found love and loyalty rather than mere duty. But it was hard to find love or feel loyalty towards a man about whom I knew little, and who shared practically nothing.

The Scalantrans had given me a historical briefing along with deepteach in the English language after selling me to him. About how the planet had been seeded with people from England after it was conquered by some king named William who was a Norman. The Normans were also trying to conquer another country called Italia, and one of their Italian vassal princes, Amico Tazzi, had been visiting England when the Seeders showed up. The Seeders grabbed mostly peasant serfs and lowly freemen called churls, who were about to be slain wholesale because their earls had rebelled against this William. They also took the country priests, who brought their religion to the new world. Tazzi just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but he was the only man of “noble” rank in the first wave of settlers, so he got to reign over the colony, and the planet ended up named for him – at first it was called Tazzi’s World, but after a few generations nearly everyone called it simply Tazzi.

Only he didn’t have any children. The priests, who were the only people with any real education (among other things, that meant they could speak, read and write in a

church language called Latin) took charge and established a Christian autarchy. They began to style themselves bishops and enlist the common people to build monumental churches and monasteries dedicated to sainted archbishops of a city back in England called Canterbury. Yet, as with all ruling elites, power had gone to their heads – and while claiming to have forsaken worldly pleasures they waxed fat off the land and its ordinary inhabitants.

That had finally led, in recent times, to a popular rebellion. The commoners had increasingly educated themselves, and come to question the Church and its teachings. They also knew that Tazzi had become increasingly prosperous, thanks to the trade with the Scalantrans, but that they were denied a fair share of the wealth. When the church began to torture and burn its critics as heretics or worse, there was a planet-wide uprising. Commoners stormed the churches and monasteries, tearing priests and monks limb from limb, and setting fire to the buildings – where those not yet killed suffered the same fate as their victims. Out of it had come a liberated, hedonistic society, where rapid scientific and technological progress had produced the Tazzi of today – as modern a seeded planet as they come. As modern in its own way as Selene or distant Andros.

The Scalantrans had wanted me to feel at home there. From their briefing, I knew about how the government center had once been religious center, and that the Curia Populi (People's Council in Latin) met in what had previously been a cathedral. Things like that.

None of which were of any practical use to me, at least as a Companion.

Gazrall wasn't native to Tazzi, I already knew. He and his father had come from elsewhere. His father Karl had died a few years before my arrival, and his mother, if she lived, had not come with them – although they did bring other men who made up his inner circle and spoke the same language – a language I was not invited to learn. They dealt with me in English; like me, they must have been deeptaught. Only, they spoke to me only about routine matters, and treated me like some ordinary servant – a thrall, as they'd say here.

I couldn't complain about my treatment in bed. His performance was adequate for a man of about 50, and a Velorian can always make the most of a man in pursuing her own pleasure. But there was never any intimacy between us; there even were times he

had me summoned to his bedchamber, and I would arrive there to find him still engaged in conversation with his inner circle in that strange language. I might as well have been part of the furniture until he dismissed them and signaled his readiness.

That was all before he lost his manhood, for lack of medical attention – which was strange because he funded medical research and yet avoided doctors – unless his inner circle included one. I could never understand why he didn't opt for restorative surgery. I could still pursue my own pleasure, but I had to fantasize about the Velorian men (and women) back home – even the lottery boy who saw to in my training on Erin'lah in safe sex. When Gazrall had automatons built to service me, he expected me to be grateful, and I made a show of that. He'd check up from time to time to make sure they'd been used and abused, as if it were a point of honor for him.

We spent more time together thereafter in public than in private; if I could no longer be his sexual partner, I could be his showpiece – the emblem of his wealth. He would take me with him to Cathedral Square to watch and be watched at sessions of the Curia Populi, and to visit the ministries with which he did business. Or rather, with which his *businesses* did business.

He and his father had brought their wealth with them from wherever they'd lived before emigrating here. There weren't that many Terrans who could afford to travel between the stars, and I knew they couldn't be adopts – Terrans who took service with the Scalantrans to help them with trade and diplomacy on seeded worlds: they got to see a lot, but they never got rich.

I never had a clue as to how the Gazralls transferred their riches to Tazzi – credits with the Scalantrans, most likely, but it might have cargo of something at once rare and compact enough to be shipped across the vastness of interstellar space and then converted to pounds or bank credits here.

That had been before my time, and they didn't talk about it – at least not with me. But their investments had already multiplied, or Gazrall couldn't have afforded to my contract. They had since grown by leaps and bounds, and were concentrated in the most lucrative industries for either the planetary market or exports – in some cases both, as with native spirits, exotic foodstuffs, Cheraz furs and art works.

Of course, there were the planetoid mines. They supplied a lot of high-grade iron and other metals, but rumor had it that the miners were looking for Xintanite, the key ingredient in Vendorian steel. The Scalantrans had it, but they had to pay dearly for it. Maybe Gazrall wanted to get in on the market for spacecraft. Groundside, it would be a godsend to the flitter industry, which he'd built up from a modest start. Where he had gotten the thread he gave me for my necklace, I had no idea. But if he could find a way to produce it in the Tazzian system.... Could *that* be what the Aureans were after? Vendor had refused to sell it to them, and so had the Scalantrans.

Of his business, I had known practically everything. But of the man himself, I had known nothing – except that he was obsessed with wealth and power. There was nothing I could have done about that, without breaking my indenture. From the High Council's point of view, he would have been only another petty tyrant on a distant world. There had been no way I could invoke the Exception, as Ju'lette had... Not until that terrible day at the end, at St. Bertwald's...

I was free of him at last, but I could never be free of what had befallen Kevin. I could never be truly free again unless I could bring the truth to Velor – and bring the might of Velor to bear.

I still felt a gnawing anxiety about the chances of my mission – and a growing obsession about the man responsible for it all, a man I had once trusted if never truly loved, a man who even now might be bringing tyranny or destruction to an entire world...

* * *

I spent the next day with Boleslav, who told me more, as best he could about the planet's exports. He introduced me to a trained sokol, signaling it to alight on my arm, and even let me feed it treats.

"They take a great deal of training," he explained. "We actually send them as hatchlings, under suspended animation, along with training manuals that the Scalantrans have translated into the local languages. Some of our customers have had to learn the hard way that it's no easy task. But our contracts don't allow them to hold us responsible for their own failures. And they *do* learn."

Zubors were indeed much larger than the cattle I was used to on Tazzi. They might be exotic elsewhere, but here their meat was a staple, and one of the basic ingredients

for some kinds of klobása – sausages made from meat and secret blends of herbs and spices.

“There’s a market for those on more advanced worlds, and we’re hoping to increase that,” he said. And the Scalantrans were playing fair, seeing a mutual interest in exotic foodstuffs. “Even I don’t know the recipes. But if somebody on some other planet claims to have duplicated them, they impose sanctions. It’s good business for them as well as us.”

That evening he offered her a klobása made from something he called swamp hog meat. It didn’t sound promising, but it turned out to be especially delicious.

“I don’t think anybody could pirate it; they don’t have swamp hogs anywhere else not that I know of. But I think we’d have to come up with some other name for them if we wanted to sell them.”

A pleasant evening concluded with my invitation for him to put the “sausage” between his legs to good use – which he did. Several times.

We were relaxing, in a state of bliss, not a care in the world. And then...

Of a sudden, he broke off, and his expression changed.

“I remember! How I heard that name!”

Gazrall, he meant, but he said it had been Garzarolli, the ruling family on a world called Himmelsreich that was once a market for sokols. Only there had been a revolution two generations ago, and the commoners who ruled the planet now and had renamed it Freiwelt, shunned aristocratic sports like hunting.

“I’ll have to ask my father,” he said.

Jonasz Zupan was old enough to remember the trade with Himmelsreich, and how it had ended – at least, how it had been told him by the predecessor of Farishan; that was before Jossalem had been assigned here.

“For a time after the Revolution, people there hated the Scalantrans – for having dealt with the ruling nobles. And they certainly didn’t want our sokols, or any other luxuries associated with their former rulers. Farishan thinks they might relent about zubors – he’ll have to check at the next Meetpoint; Freiwelt isn’t on the *Boundless Opportunity*’s route, and they’d have to work something out with the *Merchanter’s Luck*.”

“What about the planet itself?”

“Its name means Free World,” he said. “But it was originally Himmelsreich, or Heaven Kingdom. Supposedly the people settled there thought at first they were being taken straight to Heaven by the Seeders. At least, that’s the story their rulers told the Scalantrans.”

Rulers and ruled came from a place on Earth called Tyrol, in a remote corner of a holy empire where there were high mountains with snow on top – those were rare, it seemed, on Himmelsreich itself. That sort of detail meant nothing to me and mattered less. Anyway, it didn’t make any sense; why should an empire be holy? Did snow-capped mountains have anything to do with it?

Anyway, the aristocrats among them seemed to think they were favored by their god, although most Terrans in the same situation were disabused of their faith by the experience of abduction. Or maybe they didn’t believe it themselves and just pretended to in order to lord it over the common people – the Seeders, as usual, hadn’t been choosy; they’d just grabbed up everybody they could in the towns they’d raided.

“The Garzarolli dynasty and the nobles could take all the food they wanted and gorge themselves; they could take any women they wanted, use them and throw them away. They had all the weapons, and the commoners had none. The nobles owned all the land, and the commoners owned none. The few lived in palaces while the many lived in hovels. They had barely enough to eat, while their lords hunted game animals – some from other worlds – for sport. Sometimes they’d even hunt commoners who’d offended them, for sport.”

Like the rule of the Church on Tazzi, I thought. Only even worse.

“One thing they had never wanted was a Companion. The ruling princes could commandeer any women they desired, and they certainly didn’t need protection.”

“More like the common people needed protection from them.”

“Yet on the first visit of the *Merchanter’s’ Luck* after the Revolution, despite their hostility to the Scalantrans, the leaders of the new government told them that Freiwelt could use a Companion after all.”

“But who could afford one, if there were no more wealthy nobles?”

“Nobody. The planet paid for her.”

I was stunned.

“But *how*?”

“They traded the Scalantrans luxuries left by the nobles – gold and other precious metals, jewelry and gems, fabrics and foodstuffs and spices unique to their world, works of art created there, exotic game animals originally imported from here and elsewhere. People there didn’t need them any more; They wanted to produce the necessities for a growing population. The Scalantrans wanted to get back in their good graces, and thus eager to cut a deal for Aman’thula.”

“Like, *why* would a planet buy a Companion?”

“For *defense*. There had been mysterious strangers living with the Garzarollis. The common people knew about them from reports of servants at the royal palace, but never had any idea who they were or where they came from. The Scalantrans can’t have known about them – only the nobles had contact with the traders. But it turned out they had a couple of starships; one of them was seen taking off during the final assault on the capital; the Garzarollis were never seen again, dead or alive – and when the Scalantrans returned there to trade, they said it hadn’t been one of theirs.”

I know what’s coming next, I thought, but let Jonasz continue.

“They thought the Garzarollis’ saviors must have been the Aureans. They had to explain about the Aureans and the Empire – and that was another reason they had to offer an especially attractive deal for a Companion: the defense of the planet was in their *mutual* interest.”

“So Aman’thula is a warrior, and only a warrior?”

“Oh, she has her needs, just like you. But they’re served by a lottery that helps fund the government.”

I’d heard of that happening on other worlds.

“Terran males are the same everywhere,” I quipped.

“Freiwelt’s females share in the lottery,” Jonasz corrected me.

By the time it came to ship out with the Scalantrans, I’d had time for another round with Boleslav. It left me good memories to carry back to the *Boundless Opportunity*; I might not find any other such diversions short of Velor itself.

Farishan had checked the ship’s Meetpoint archives for the *Merchanter’s Luck*, and confirmed Jonasz’ story, giving me independent evidence of the Gazrall connection

to the Aureans. But there was still an anomaly here: the very name of the weapon, the Garzoldan Assault Rifle. It sounded as if it had a connection to the family, but if so it must have been invented later elsewhere – there could never have been a Revolution on Himmelsreich if the rulers there had possessed it.

Had the *Merchanter's' Luck* ever reported any of this to Velor? Apparently not, if the GAR itself was news when Ju'lette brought word of it.

Chapter Five

After the excitement at Trpcic, it was mostly boredom – and increasing frustration – as the *Boundless Opportunity* continued its journey. There were still stops to come at Irukan and Estor before we reached Velor – and Travel Captain Manesha wasn't about to skip them to save me a few months, even if my mission was urgent.

"What with the troubles a few years ago over the *Far Wanderer* and the *Galactic Roamer*, we can't afford to give the Velorians any cause for complaint," she told me. "Moreover, we are expected to pick up new lottery boys on both worlds, in addition to the usual trade goods."

The trade goods were mostly technological specialties Velor had yet to produce for itself, but also included exotic foods – and even art objects. Nedra Jahr-El, one of the Companions on Irukan, was indentured to Eksayar Khosrau, owner of an electronics business – which designed and manufactured, among other things, scoreboards with elaborate video displays for Scrumbles. I didn't expect to meet her; anyway, there wouldn't be any point to it – all she'd know was what the High Council had told her, even if that included the second message without a seal.

Not that I didn't welcome the chance to go outside for the trade fair; being cooped up on the ship had been hard to take, once there was nothing more to learn from Manesha or Farishan or even the historian Kinyam. Only, I kept my distance from the lottery boys, both there and back aboard the *Boundless Opportunity* – they were off limits to me, just as they were to Nedra. But I did get in some flying, just take a better look at the world, one I'd never seen before and would doubtless never see again.

Irukan was seeded from some ancient country on Earth called Parsi, but that had been long ago, centuries before Velor itself was seeded, and little or nothing of the old culture remains – it's an ultra high-tech world now. And yet most of the planet is given over to forests; the people live mainly in linear cities along transcontinental highways. Computer systems process data on food and other resources to rationalize production and distribution. Machines do most of the work, leaving humans to devote themselves to cultural pursuits like singing, dancing, and even recreational flying with artificial wings – forget about flitters! It was startling to have company in the air...

It was startling to some of the company too, and one of the flyers lost control of his wings – I had to take hold of him and carry him down to the ground as gently as I could. A flying woman – his wife or girlfriend, I suppose – followed us. They both yelled at me, though I couldn't understand a word they were saying. We landed in a forest clearing, and after a few moments they both took off – leaving me feeling embarrassed. But at least I got to see the wonder of the ancient forest on such a modern world.



Whoever the flyers were, they hadn't lodged a complaint – at least, none that got back to the Scalantrans at the trade fair. I suppose they must have realized *what* I was,

even if they didn't know *who* I was – and made allowances for an ignorant Outworlder, no matter if that outworlder was a Velorian.

Just to be on the safe side, I didn't make any further aerial excursions, even though I knew enough by then to be on the lookout and avoid unwanted close encounters. On the ground, there weren't any opportunities for close encounters of the kind I did want. Just the routine, and boring, sights of the trade fair. Until it was time to return to the Boundless Opportunity – Estor awaited and then, finally, Velor – well, Erin'lah, to be precise.

* * *

Estor came and went.

It was an aquatic planet, where most of the people lived on floating islands. Seafaring came as naturally to them as surface travel anywhere else. Most of it was commercial, for fisheries management and harvesting, but there was also a tradition sailing just for the sake of sailing. The fanciful designs of recreational yachts had caught the attention of the Scalantrans early on – and now custom versions commanded high prices on other worlds. They had to, inasmuch as they were as hard to transport as space shuttles.

One of the jobs of the Companion there, Rhea Nar-Zen, was to help load them aboard without damage. But since Velor was the next and last stop on this run, and had no use for boats of any kind, her services were not required, and I had no occasion to call on her. I did get a chance to fly again, without running into any competition, and the floating islands – on which most of the homes were grown rather than built – were like nothing I'd ever seen, or even known of.

I didn't know the language there, any more than at Irukan. It might have been educational to speak with the natives, especially those who had been engineered with gills, to live below as well as above water. That sort of thing was controversial, Farishan told me, and – unlike the yachts – it was not advertised abroad.

None of that mattered any longer. What mattered was how I was going to tell my story when I reached my homeworld, and how it was going to be received.

I already knew that the High Council hadn't been honest with us about Ju'lette and her appeal. Could I afford to be any more honest?

Part Two: Legend and Legerdemain

Chapter Six

Landing on Erin'lah was a matter of routine. The Scalantran trading compound was unchanged since I'd left. I didn't know about the training grounds – they weren't visible from here. While Farishan set up shop, we were approached by Opara. She was still Factor General here.

She was surprised to see Manesha and Kinyam accompanying me, and further surprised when I introduced myself, and them, in her own language. After which I could not wait another moment to explain our business.

"I am responding to a general message from the High Council regarding any new weapons deployed by the Aureans," I said. "I have actually encountered such a weapon on Tazzi; it is extremely dangerous – even to Velorians. Bensalem, your counterpart on Selene, has seen the evidence, and seen fit to revoke his advisory that the Scalantrans should attempt to exploit it for commercial purposes. I also regret to inform you that the authorities on Tazzi have arrested Vaharem and his mate group, doubtless to prevent them from revealing what they know."

"We can testify that engineers in our employ on Selene have analyzed the nature of the new weapon, a larger and more powerful version of the Garzoldan Assault Rifle, and that we have brought an accurate report of their findings, along with copies of the GAR chips themselves," Manesha said.

"And we both trust Vespyr's account of events on Tazzi, which she has risked her life to bring to the attention of the High Council," Kinyam added.

Opara was stunned, to say the least, but not very hopeful.

"You may face a skeptical reception," she warned. "The last Companion to make such a claim was unable to substantiate it, and she caused us no end of trouble, having fled here with a lover, a Tanzrobian friend and one of the instructors here after the High Council dismissed her story."

"We have heard about that from the *Far Wanderer*," Manesha said. "Even before that, an unsigned account Ju'lette's hearing before the Council was received by Vespyn in the same message crystal as the Council's official advisory."

"That is why I knew it was imperative to bring the chips," I said; and added, with a sigh, "If only we knew who sent that second message..."

"We aren't privy to the affairs of the Council," Opara advised.

"But the *Far Wanderer* has been taking pains to make Velorians and Scalantrans elsewhere privy to the situation and, hopefully, to rally support," Manesha said.

"Much good that does us here," Opara complained, "There's been hell to pay for what the *Galactic Roamer* did. They'll never be allowed to call here again; you can count on that. For our sake, for the sake of all Scalantrans, you had better have truth on your side."

"We have truth," Kinyam said. "It is part of our own history now, and it is my duty to record that history faithfully."

"Given the low regard in which your people are held at present, I doubt that your word would be taken. In any case, you have no standing to testify, and since the case could be presented only on Velor itself, it would be impossible for you to do so."

Manesha nodded to me.

"So it's all up to you."

"I am ready to face the High Council," I said. "The only question is whether the Council is ready to accept the truth, in face of the evidence I will submit. We have been given reason to believe that the Council has deliberately misrepresented the situation, to the Scalantrans and to the Companions."

"My only concern is how this will impact the Scalantrans. My only authority here is to represent their interests, and that only with the Senate" Opara said. "My position does not involve any direct contact with the High Council."

"So how do I contact them? If they wouldn't listen to Ju'lette; is there any way to for me to get their attention?"

"Your only contact here would be Jes'kor, superintendent of the Academy. His uncle Koro'lat is Senior High Councillor. On the face of it, you could hardly ask for a better introduction."

Opara paused for a moment.

“On the other hand, he shares his uncle’s antipathy towards us, and likewise his skepticism about the Aurean menace; it will take a good deal of convincing for you to win him over.”

“Does he know enough about engineering to judge the evidence?”

“I wouldn’t know. I gather he’s not too bright about technology... and other things. And... Well, if I were you, I’d make backup copies of your evidence, just in case...”

“We’ve already thought of that,” Manesha said. “And although we’re supposed to remain here only for the trading negotiations, limited as those may as things now stand, we don’t intend to leave without at least having made every effort to fulfill the mission that has brought Vespyr here.”

* * *

It took me a while to reach the training ground, given that I couldn’t fly here, and going by leaps and bounds would feel rather silly – and look sillier to the candidates and the lottery boys – if I came down in or near one of the sex shacks.

I could still remember the shacks from when I had been in training. They were more to protect the modesty of the lottery boys than our own – although they might occasionally conceal an unfortunate fatal accident if things went wrong.

I wished I could have brought Kinyam with me, but that would have been inviting trouble. I had called ahead, but been told that Jes’kor was busy. I knew where the office was, however – just where it had always been, before he had been appointed to head it. I hadn’t mentioned my name when I called, knowing that he might not want to see me – but I wanted to see him.

“You are out of uniform,” he complained when I made my presence known. And indeed, I was wearing just a chemise I had picked up on Selene, and which had served me well since – it was modest, but easy to remove when the occasion called for it.

“My name is Vespyr Tal’esta,” I said. “I have invoked Exception to my indenture on Tazzi on the grounds that my master is allied with the Aureans. Furthermore, I have proof that the Empire has developed a new weapon, and am duty bound to report this to the High Council as called for in the Exploratory Investigation advisory that was sent by message crystal to all Companions.”

“How did you come to Erin’lah? And why are you *here*? Why hasn’t the Council been informed?”

“I came with the *Boundless Opportunity*.”

Jes’kor looked puzzled, and quickly checked his comp.

“That ship doesn’t even stop at Tazzi,” he said a few moments later.

“I boarded at Selene. After flying the wormhole from Tazzi.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that?”

“Look up my indenture. It was sold to Salomon Gazrall on Tazzi.”

He did some more checking.

“Then you can’t be who you say you are.”

“My identity can easily be vouched for by my lifecypher records. And if Kal’Entor still teaches here, he will remember me – he will certainly remember certain incidents of my combat training... among other things.”

I *owed* him. I hadn’t been very good in combat training; I hadn’t really anticipated needing it. But Kal’Entor wouldn’t let me off; he made me stick at it. And when it came time to deal with Mal’kar, that training had stood me in good stead. Not that I’d ever tell him about *that*.

“He is busy training a candidate today, like our other instructors,” Jes’kor said. “There is an increasing demand for Companions... But assuming that you *are* telling the truth, or at least the truth as you see it, what would you have the Council do?”

“Appeal to the Senate to put Velor on a war footing. Find a way to counter the Aureans’ latest weapon – an enhanced version of the Garzoldan Assault Rifle that can kill Companions, take out starships in an instant and even devastate entire planets. As things stand, nothing can stop them – they can conquer worlds at will. Tanzrobi was just the beginning. And all they had then was the original GAR.”

“You have been misinformed,” Jes’kor snapped. “I have it on good authority that it was only a dissident group that attacked Tanzrobi. Elements of the same group raided a world called Nova Iberia.”

“What good authority?”

“A prisoner taken by the Scalantrans and brought here by another Companion who broke her indenture and then engaged in scandalous behavior, of which I will not speak.

But he confided much to *us*, about the perfidy of the Scalantrans and the rogue Aureans – who are conspiring to make trouble for Velor *and* the Empire, which has no ambitions beyond its home region. His source is a man of peace, an Aurean diplomat known to and vouched for by him – Mal’kar Klen.”

I couldn’t say another word.

It was all coming back to me. Not just my horror but my shame. How could I tell anyone here that I had been seduced by the very same narrative, and by the very man who brought it with him to the world that I was sworn to defend against the Empire?

It had been born of need, a need that I felt could be satisfied only by a supremis. I remembered my training on Erin’lah with a lottery boy, François had known in his head I was no threat to his manhood, and yet in his body... It would be the same with other Terrans as a Companion. I’d practiced with dummies; I’d learned how to control my strength, even under gold, and I proved it with him. And it would be worth it, in service to Velor.

But Gazrall had hardly been worth it, even in the early years. Kevin had been, but that violated my contract even if my relationship with him had been justified only by my sense of mission regarding the GAR. And when I realized that my duty as a Velorian was to bring word to Velor, I’d had to give him up – let him go into hiding... with Jana. I’d felt a twinge of jealousy there, but it was for the best. How could I have known that she would betray him... or that her treachery would echo mine?

It was my aching need that Mal’kar understood, that let him draw me into what I took for an affair of the heart and the body, one that would lead me to regard his every word as Truth, even as his every touch was True Love.

He was so beautiful – and irresistible. I, who had been trained to be worshipped by Terrans, was drawn to this living god. I, who had worn gold for the sake of Terrans, and taken pride in how I could drive them mad with lust, could come to him totally naked and let him do with me what he would. To feel his cock inside me, to feel him explode inside me more powerfully than a bomb...

I could let loose with him, and he could let loose with me. Neither of us needed to hold anything back. We were free to be ourselves, I believed, and that belief overwhelmed me. Nothing else mattered. For his sake, I could forget everyone and everything else.

Without realizing it until too late, he seduced my mind as well as my body; he had convinced me that he sought the triumph of good for everyone everywhere, that together we could create a new utopia. His words were so powerful, words of about a Third Force in the Galaxy to protect other worlds against any and all oppressors. We could do it, slowly but surely, beginning with just one world. Gazrall could be eased out of power, and a new day would dawn. We would transfigure the obscene GAR, using it only for our righteous cause. The Aureans would leave us be – they had given up their imperial ambitions.

*Why travel all the way to Velor when we could usher in the millennium where we were? As Mal'kar had enlightened me, so would we enlighten others... including Kevin. I looked forward to bringing him into the roundtable we would create... until the day of reckoning came, the day that Mal'kar told me that he had located my former lover and taken the "appropriate action" against him for the good of the cause... **our** cause.*

***His** cause. No longer mine. My eyes had finally been opened.*

My shame and rage had come back to me in a flash.

In another flash, I lost it. Lost it utterly.

Chapter Seven

Jes'kor wasn't seriously injured.

But only because several nearby training officers – all experienced in combat – came to his aid and pulled me off him.

I ended up chained in gold, then safely shackled in Vendorian steel and locked in a storage building. One of the trainers glared at me as he shut the door.

"You're even crazier than the first one!" he yelled. "But this time, the High Council will do its duty. You will not escape its judgment."

At that moment, I couldn't have argued with him. I was cursing myself inwardly for letting my rage overpower me – a rage I had suppressed during my journey here, a rage I imagined I had put behind me, a rage that had put an end to my mission... I had failed the people of Tazzi, failed all the worlds and peoples threatened by the Aureans, failed the Companions who would fall victim to the GAR... and I had failed Kevin. I was all alone with my guilt. I had nobody to blame but myself. I was still alive, but Mal'kar had won – he was now victorious from the grave...

My prospects were as bleak as the wastelands of Erin'lah south of the Academy that I still remembered from my training days.



Or so I thought.

I expected only the worst: my first real visitor – the officers who checked up on me several times a day hardly counted – would be the man assigned to convey me to Velor to face my trial before the Council. And that was exactly what happened – except for what happened next.

“Junior Councillor El-Mir Dar’yul,” he introduced himself. “I am here on behalf of the High Council, to investigate your case and transport you to Velor for your hearing.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say – certainly nothing that he’d want to hear. Only then *he* had something more to say.

“I suspect from my intelligence that you already know how it went with Ju’lette.”

He must have seen from the shock on my face that this was the last thing I would have expected.

"You!" I exclaimed. "The second message!"

"But don't breathe a word of that. As far as Koro'lat and his allies know, the only message sent to Companions was the general advisory, which remains the only official word of the Council. I can't say what others may have made of that second message, and you are thus far the only one to have responded to it."

He paused for a moment.

"And for that, you've become a killer Velorian? Would-be, at least? I'd hoped for better, as you can well understand. And while Jes'kor would have been no loss, you've set yourself up as a madwoman – how *could* you?"

I couldn't help bursting out the source of my rage.

"He murdered a man I—"

"Jes'kor? Are you *that* crazy?"

"*Mal'kar!* The Aurean Velor trusted with the fate of Tazzi! The man who nuked an entire commune to eliminate the Tazzian who'd learned the secret of the GAR! The man who..."

I suddenly realized that I couldn't share my personal involvement with Kevin, or my betrayal of him. What Mal'kar had done to his innocent victims on Tazzi, his hidden agenda as an imperial agent – these were the facts the High Council had to know. Even more important than that, however, was the true story of the GAR. I'd have to begin with that.

"Are you all right?" Dar'yul asked.

"No, I am **not** all right, and neither would you be, if you'd been through what I've been through, and know what I know."

"But we have to convince the Council otherwise. And that's going to be difficult."

"Not as difficult as you think. We have... well, had... a working GAR, a heavy GAR – a Velorian-killer and even a world-killer. And we have brought the design for it. And copies of the GAR control chips. On the *Boundless Opportunity*."

"Can you take me there?"

"Of course. But it will look better if *you* take *me*. As part of your investigation."

"Koro'lat can hardly object to that, since he himself sent me here. But I think I need to learn more about you first."

“The Scalantrans can vouch for me, and offer proof of my story.”

“If anyone here wonders why I am visiting the them, I can truthfully tell them that I am gathering evidence for your case.”

“They can’t come to Velor to testify, of course.”

“That was the problem with the Scalantrans who brought Ju’lette, as you must know from the transcript of her hearing – and Koro’lat and his allies refused to credit the testimony of the Tanzrobian Zanele, who had accompanied her.”

“Indeed.”

“She was involved in a scandalous relationship with a sex instructor here. That certainly didn’t help.”

“We heard about that on the way here. The *Galactic Roamer* has been spreading the story far and wide – about how they arranged for Ju’lette and Tassos and Tol’or and Zanele to flee on their ship. They considered it a matter of honor, as Ju’lette had saved them from the Enemy Aureans, and Zanele had helped save another ship.”

“You’re up to speed, I see. But we have to prepare for what comes next.”

* * *

The meeting at Opara’s headquarters was supposed to be a mere formality, but turned out to be more than that.

Dar’yul recorded vid depositions from Manesh and Kinyam, identifying the cubes given into their ship’s custody on Selene – with control chips for the GAR itself and data chips for the tests that Kevin and I had carried out. The latter were originals, of course, but the former were duplicates, and included vids from the engineers at Veliky Vagon Tvorets that explained their findings, and certified that the chips themselves were exact copies of those I had brought from Tazzi, and had been produced in my presence.

The travel captain also identified a copy of the advisory from Bensalem, signed by the factor general himself, warning his fellow Scalantrans against trying to exploit the GAR for profit. Kinyam could testify only about what I had told him, but shared his own suspicions about how a working GAR had come to Tazzi – it would be up to me to share my mine about Gazrall with the High Council. But that would be of little import compared to the evidence of the chips.

All very cut and dried. Until Opara weighed in.

“You clearly have enough to convince the High Council, and to have the matter brought before the Senate. But what can the Senate *do* to deal with the Aurean threat?”

There was a moment of hesitation on Dar’yul’s part. Then....

“We can now break their monopoly on the GAR, and make that known to them,” he said. “We can make it known that we can defend Velor against any attack, and set warships with GARs to guard our wormhole. But we may also have to develop a fleet of GAR-armed warships that can reach the Aureans’ own worlds, and deter them with the threat of their own destruction.”

“And what of *our* worlds, and *our* ships?”

“They too could be armed.”

“We are *traders*, we have *always* been traders. If we become anything else, if we are even *seen* as anything else... It was bad enough that Bensalem was tempted by the idea of trading in weapons of mass destruction. We convinced him to reverse himself, but it was a close call – and it will take years for all our ships to get the message. I can only hope that they all heed it.”

“We could supply you with Companions who—”

“Who would be just as vulnerable as the ships themselves.”

“As would those serving on planets,” I added.

“Koro’lat didn’t mention it at the hearing for Ju’lette, but in private conversation he has recognized the need to expand the Senate’s home system Naval force, and even to deploy warships beyond the system to counter Aurean threats. But to pay for this, he is convinced that we must redouble the trade in Companions – no world should be left without them, or limited to one. They can be armed with light GARs and the planetary military forces with heavy GARs. Nothing short of that can be of any avail.”

I later took Dar’yul aside to discuss my own concerns as a Velorian

“Do you truly suppose that very many of my fellow Velorians will want to take the risk of being annihilated?”

“They won’t have any choice in the matter. Conscription.”

The first Companions had indeed been conscripts in all but name, given away by their fathers or the priests. It was only later that they discovered that how powerful they

became outside the Velorian gold field and – much later – that they could live on and on, far past the time they would have died at home. But freedom for them, once they had served their indentures, had become a challenge for the High Council.

But now...

I could see where things might be going.

“Will they make the indentures indefinite, too?”

“I don’t think Koro’lat would go that far. The Companions have to feel they have a *chance*.”

“A chance of what?”

“A chance for freedom and near-immortality, versus the risk of being cut down in the prime of life. It should all balance out in their minds. That’s how Koro’lat sees it. How the conscripts will see it...”

A sudden thought occurred to me.

“What if they conscripted *men* too?”

Dar’yul was clearly flabbergasted, and it took a minute for him to respond.

“They’d never hear of it,” he said.

“But, like the women, they could look forward to longer lives.”

“Only, they wouldn’t *have* any women... unless—”

“The terms of indenture for Companions would forbid that. Even those for groups as opposed to individuals exclude outsiders.”

“Solomon Gazrall was an older man, and allowed me... certain liberties. I even formed... attachments.”

“You were indeed fortunate in being allowed those ‘certain liberties.’”

“Even if such liberties were sanctioned for all Companions, Terrans might resent us for taking them with Velorians – they’d be constantly reminded that they are ordinary men, that they can never measure up to Velorian men as lovers.”

“Some have taken Terran lovers, and even found happiness with them.”

“But only after fulfilling the indentures.”

Being indentured as Companions for a mere century came to seem a blessing, compared to a short life back home under the domination of men, for it could leave them

free to live and love as they saw fit... although that freedom could be bittersweet, given the short life spans of their Terran lovers.

But it might all be academic, I thought.

“Won’t it take a vote of the Senate to authorize conscription?”

“Indeed. And for all the military measures to be funded by the indentures – which might be assigned to planets as such, rather than wealthy individuals or groups.”

“Until Gazrall, nobody on Tazzi was wealthy enough. But *planetary* indentures? How could that work?”

“There are doubtless worlds that would tax their own people for protection, or the illusion of protection, once word spreads about the GARs. As for the rest, there could be lotteries for the intimate favors of the Companions, just like those for the boys sent here to—”

“Enough! I *get* it!”

“And it might all be in vain. There are no easy answers. Perhaps none at all. But I can discuss the issue with the rest of the Council *and* the Senate after they’ve gone through the motions with the Priests at the Shrine for the Remembrance.”

The Shrine...

“I’ll leave you here, on condition of good behavior, while I return home with the evidence I’ve collected here. You’d have to be jailed if you came with me.”

“They surely wouldn’t want *me* at the Shrine.”

“In olden days, people in our positions would have prayed together to Skietra for deliverance,” Dar’yul mused. “But only the Priests believe in that any longer. The Shrine is nearly always deserted, except for the day they gather to honor her once a year.”

I myself had visited the Shrine once, out of idle curiosity. It had been deserted that day, even by the Priests, and hadn’t impressed me in any case. It had been built centuries ago, soon after the Galen created the Velorians – and before their creators had deserted them, before the split with the Naturalists and all that had followed it, leading to the dilemma they all faced today...

No, the Shrine to Skietra was a relic of the past, like the cult I was born into. The Galen no longer had any interest in us. Today, Velor had to find a way to deal with the future.

I was making progress. *We* were making progress. For the first time since I had left Tazzi, I could feel that the end was in sight – that we could deal with the threat of the GAR, that I could make possible the redemption of a world that I had come to love as a Companion, that hundreds and even thousands of other worlds would be safe from the Aureans, that the Scalantrans too would be free of their menace. It would be a new dawn for all the scattered human and other peoples who sought only the freedom to pursue their own lives.

Yet little did I know, as Dar'yul had been gathering the evidence on my behalf that would allow me return to the homeworld to fulfill the rest of my mission, that the Shrine still held symbolic importance, even to the Galen... And that one of them had set her own plan in motion,

And so it came to pass that I missed the Arrival of her messenger, seemingly the greatest event in the history of Velor... which was only the prelude to the greatest of all, Her own Advent. I missed that too, although I would soon become part of what She wrought.



Chapter Eight

I had been dividing my time on Erin'lah between Opara's headquarters and the *Boundless Opportunity*, while waiting for word from Dar'yul, who had been supplied with copies of the GAR control chips but was putting off returning home until the last minute in order to study them.

He was hoping they could be used to produce a working model of the weapon to demonstrate to those who had the power to make the decisions I knew had to be made. The data chips of the tests Kevin had carried out should be enough to convince them, but an actual GAR would have more dramatic impact. *Seeing*, for the High Council and the Senate, would be believing...

For all of that, they would have the Scalantrans to thank, as I already had. But in the meantime, there was nothing to do, or see, in and around the port, and nothing to talk about except whether the *Boundless Opportunity* would be pressured to accept a new "cargo" of Companions before we heard back from Dar'yul – and, if so, whether Opara and Farishan would stall in order the pressure the High Council to listen to us about the GAR threat.

Erin'lah had nothing of the appeal of Tazzi or the other worlds I had visited since. It was drab, even desolate, just as I remembered from my training days. Yet I missed the company of my own kind, few of whom lived at the port – and those only to do business with the Scalantrans. So I sought out Kal'Entor. He was on duty, I knew, and couldn't take time off to come see me at the Factor General's compound.

I could meet him at the Academy, but I couldn't meet him at the barracks, shared by instructors, candidates and lottery boys, or at the classrooms. The only alternative was a sex shack, on a day when trainees were otherwise occupied and nobody would notice us. And for old time's sake, that was just the thing. So I headed for his office,

"Your reputation precedes you," he remarked after we greeted each other.

"Let's not talk about that," I said, as I disrobed. "That's not why I'm here."

"Nor why I'm here," he agreed, baring himself.

I hungered for a man, a *Velorian* man, and he was up for it, *really* up for it, even after more than 20 years – aging for Velorians here on Erin'lah was slower here than on Velor, if not nearly as prolonged as on human worlds.

Making love with him was heavenly. No need for gold. No need for caution. We had at each other for hours, in every way. We came and came and came, screaming with absolute abandon. When we were finally sated, there was no need for regret... only the romantic afterglow, as we reminisced about old times.

"When we first met, could you have imagined anything more absurd than my parents joining a cult that believed that a Prima like me should only serve the Galen as a Procreator? I must have been the oldest virgin in their commune when I managed to escape to Vest'athy."

Vest'athy... what awaited me there now?

"I don't imagine even the Priests hold out for that these days," he said, without guessing what I was thinking. "I don't know why they bother with the Remembrance."

"The Tal'estas never attended. They thought the Priests were backsliders. What must they have thought of *me* when I left them... I reported them to the authorities, but I don't know what came of that – I didn't even *want* to know. I just wanted to put as much distance between myself and them as I could – and that meant volunteering to become a Companion, even though I was well past the usual age."

"Good for you!"

"I've never regretted it – not since my first fuck by my Galactic History professor here."

"The very first? And why the history teacher?"

"Yes, I was still a virgin. And he was about to retire and marry; this was his last chance for a fling."

"How did it feel for you?"

"Oh Skietra! To feel a man inside me for the first time, to feel him shoot inside me, to feel myself come as I made him come... And we kept at it for hours."

"I wish it had been me!"

"Would you have taught me how to go easy on the lottery boys?"

Kal'Entor just smirked.

"Of course, I had other things to learn. And you were the best teacher there."

And that's as close as I'll get to my use of his combat training.

"Happy to have obliged!"

“And I learned so much to teach others. I loved the lottery boys, coming from worlds far across the Galaxy, just for the chance of making it with a Velorian, knowing the risks... the adoration on their faces when they met me in the sex shacks, and their surprise that I was as eager as they were – that I wanted them as much as they wanted me. Even when they were *too* eager, when they came from just *looking* at me, I wouldn’t let them down – I’d lick their cocks, taste their cum, and they’d be up for me again in no time. I taught them all there was to know about pleasuring a woman... the women back home they partnered with must be the luckiest Terran women alive.”

“And how was your luck – out there on Tazzi?”

“Better than I expected. Salomon Gazrall, who held my indenture, suffered me to find... other relationships.”

“With Terrans?”

I just nodded, hesitating to reveal anything more, especially about the ancestry of Kevin, which I knew would rub most of my fellow Velorians the wrong way. But thinking about Kevin made me think of Mal-kar... and that in turn made me think of Jes’kor – and what connection there could possibly be between them.

Kal’Entor must have seen the look on my face just then; I thought he must have sensed what it was about. Only...

“I could never have had your kind of luck,” he remarked. “A Velorian man and a Terran woman? Fatal to her, even under gold.”

I frowned at him. It wasn’t funny. He must have realized that. I feared that our conversation was at an end – at least on the matter realized we had to talk about, the matter that might be crucial to my mission.

A moment later, however, I had my chance as Kal’Entor changed the subject.

“Did you also see combat out there?” he asked, “Your latest exercise here was hardly your finest hour.”

“My anger overcame my training, for which I had little use on Tazzi. There were never any serious threats to Gazrall. He himself was the threat to his own people, but my hands were tied, until it became clear that he had allied himself with the Empire – and brought in an Aurean enforcer.”

Had my old/new lover heard about Mal'kar? I couldn't be sure, and dared not be direct with him about it. Yet I had to allude to the matter, now that I had realized that there was a mystery about what Jes'kor had said that set me off – and I sensed an opportunity. I didn't want to mention Mal'kar by name, and yet...

"That enforcer from the Empire. He waged terrorism against opponents of Gazrall's regime, and even nuked an entire community to that end. And when I met Jes'kor, he praised the very same Aurean as a man of peace – you can imagine how I felt, why I took out my rage on him. Yet I was so consumed by rage that it didn't occur to me how Jes'kor could have known about that particular Aurean – whether there might be some hidden agenda that—"

"Stop right there! Not my department. You'd better bring this up with that High Councillor they sent to investigate you."

So I did.

* * *

When I met Dar'yul again, I told him why I had been set off by what Jes'kor said about Mal'kar, without wondering at the time how he could have ever *heard* about hm.

"Could Koro'lat be behind it?" I asked, with great trepidation.

"Not a chance. Whatever else you can say about him, he would never betray us by spreading Aurean lies. It had to have come through Pimponeous."

"Pimponeous?"

"An officious Aurean official captured by the Tanzrobians and brought here by the *Far Wanderer*, along with his captors. On the same ship that had previously been taken by the Aureans at Nova Iberia, but freed by Ju'lette – who first learned about the GAR from the Tanzrobians and came to warn us... you know from the *Galactic Roamer* how that played out. Anyway, Pimponeous has been held here by port security ever since, because nobody could figure out what else to do with him."

"What could he have had to do with—"

"That's something we need to find out. But how?"

"Tell him you'll call him as a witness for my hearing before the High Council."

"But the *gravity*; he's only a *Beta*."

"*Exactly!* He'll be *begging* to talk here instead, on the record."

“But first I have to get Jes’kor on the record as to what he told you about Mal’kar, and whether he indeed heard it from Pimponeous. He won’t be eager to help your case, to say the least.”

“Since Koro’lat assigned you to investigate *me*, you could simply tell him that his nephew claims to have information about an Aurean I’ve dealt with, and that he should ask Jes’kor for a deposition.”

“Aren’t you the devious one!”

“Not half as devious as the Aureans – what they’ve been doing on Tazzi may be part of some greater plan of infiltration and disinformation.”

I told him about the ruling Garzarolli clan of Himmelsreich, the significance of the GAR’s name, and my belief that the family might have been favored by the Empire and then rescued from the Revolution – with Salomon Gazrall having been a pawn from the start.

“I can’t prove it, but if Pimponeous knows about Mal’kar’s part, he might be in on the rest of it as well.”

“I see...”

“Yet it’s essential that nobody here have any suspicion as to your actual role with me, just on the off chance that it might get back to them prematurely.”

“A tall order. But the first order of business is still for me to brief Koro’lat about the GAR, with the evidence in hand, and discuss how to deal with it. Once that’s settled, he should be ready to believe the rest from your own testimony, and the High Council will surely want the Senate to take it all up.”

“Do you suppose that the Senate might authorize an operation against Gazrall for turning Tazzi into an Aurean base?”

“We’d need the Scalantrans to transport our forces. But perhaps we should think of creating a Navy.”

“History in the making... I’ve never imagined I might play a part in *that*.”

I could never have imagined the part I actually *would* play.

* * *

Dar’yul had left for Velor a couple of days before the Remembrance.

Jes’kor and his retainers followed the day before the Day.

That surprised me, although his family connection gave him the privilege. Along with one of the candidates he had taken unto himself, without her consent. Well, like the others, she'd have to get used to that when she faced indenture....

What didn't surprise me was that he had left orders for everyone else to stick to the business of combat training.

With nobody to supervise them – at least, nobody callous enough to rat them out – the candidates and the lottery boys and even the instructors got down to the business of fucking. Couples had to wait in line at the sex shacks.

Kal'Entor had a better idea: the Academy superintendent's home/office, the only private facility here...

Some of the others actually cheered when we made our intentions known. "Break his fucking bed!" one even shouted.

That bed was designed and built for Velorians. But we managed to break it just the same, in the heat of our passion.

What broke the a few days later was the news from the Remembrance. But I was one of the last to hear about it.

Chapter Nine

Dar'yul returned unexpectedly the day before the Day itself. He wanted a chance to interrogate Pimponeous while Jes'kor was still on Velor.

"First the good news," he said. "I turned over the duplicate control chips and data chips to Koro'lat, along with the testimonies I recorded at the Factor General's office. He was impressed by the thoroughness of my report, and promised to contact the Senate – but only after the Remembrance, of course. I had begged off on attending that, and he understood my skepticism – indeed, he shares it. But as Senior Councillor..."

Politics!

"And now the bad news. He still believes you are culpable for desertion, and that you could have relied on the Scalantrans to bring warning to us about the GAR, and to deliver the evidence."

"But—"

"I know, I told him that time was of the essence, and that only you could have carried the chips to Selene. But he insisted that we have only your word for that, and for the situation on Tazzi. And he's even looking into your family background, for evidence of instability."

"How *dare* he!"

"Alas, it's a matter of public record."

"I know nothing of that."

"There was a case against them, after you left for Tazzi. I'll have to look that up and brief you on it. And your remaining kin may be called to testify."

"This is *monstrous*."

"I agree. But the bottom line is that you still face trial before the Council – after the Remembrance. And Jes'kor has Koro'lat's ear, naturally. We have to discredit him, but without seeming to be challenging his uncle as Senior Councillor. And Pimponeous is still the key to that."

"Did you get a chance to talk to Jes'kor himself?"

"Only briefly. I told him what you said about why you had it in for Mal'kar."

"And how did he respond to that?"

"That if Mal'kar *had* killed anyone on Tazzi, he must have had it coming to him – 'Just like that traitorous Companion has it coming to her.'"

"So now opposing the Empire is treason?"

"So it would seem – to him. But I did ask him whether Pimponeous would know anything further that might be of use in the case against you."

"'Ask him yourself,' he told me. 'Can't you see I'm busy? I need to prepare for the Remembrance. I'll be representing the Academy there; the priests need to know that we still honor them.'"

"Idiot!"

"So I didn't even need to have Koro'lat warrant taking a deposition! And since I'm handling the case against you, Jes'kor can hardly object to an interview. Of course, you can't be there. But I'll record the session your sake and the Council's. I'm sure you can find something to do here while I'm at the port."

Kal'Entor and I found a lot to do...

* * *

Dar'yul had also found a lot to do, what he called his “matter of extreme gravity.”

“A fine way of putting it,” I quipped, when I met him back at Opara’s headquarters – she let us have a small office to ourselves.

“That’s how I put it to Pimponeous. I told him it was dead serious, and within the law – the Council hears cases only in its chambers. At first, he didn’t take it seriously, but when he realized it wasn’t a joke, he broke.”

“So what does he know?”

“Precious little. He was just a minor functionary on Tanzrobi, with an exaggerated sense of his importance. He was trained in mind foolery, and thought he could convert the Azizi, giving them what he called an ‘educational opportunity.’ He learned a few phrases of their native language, while regaling them with Aurean lore.”

“They must have *loved* that.”

“It turns out that his model was your Mal’kar, whom he’d never met and who was never a diplomat, but of whom he’d heard glowing reports of his exploits in seduction as well as mind foolery, and who was said to have turned even Companions.”

“This was *before* Pimponeous was taken by Ju’lette.”

“Indeed.”

“So I wasn’t the first. A small comfort.”

“Let it be a comfort that you were the *last*, the one to put an end to him.”

“I can live with that.”

“And the High Council will hear of it; Koro’lat will surely not be pleased to learn that Jes’kor was taken in by the lies of an Aurean agent.”

“That will help my case.”

“While it isn’t part of my official duty as a Councillor, I also intend to approach Jasto’pur.”

“Jasto’pur?”

“First of the Senate, which will decide how to respond to the Empire’s deployment of GARs. Koro’lat’s push to simply recruit more Companions is ill-advised and inadequate. I hope both will listen to you, and learn to appreciate how much Velor owes to you. If there is any justice in the world, you will go down in history.”

“So you will be *there* for me too.”

“But only in my official capacity. There must be nothing personal between us – even a hint of such a relationship could compromise you. Quite aside from the fact that it would be unfair to my wife and children.”

“You are an honorable man, and I am striving to be an honorable woman. There is a trust between us, which I will not break,”

I winked at him in mock seduction, and added, “Of course, I can easily find other partners in passion, and have. During my journey here, and at the Academy. But I’m not going to talk about any of them.”

“Is there anything you *do* want to talk about?”

I had another sudden impulse. But should I yield to it?

I’d been *wanting* to talk about Kevin, but there’d been nobody I wanted to talk *to* about him. It wasn’t a matter of intimate details, but of what he had meant to me, still meant to be – and what it meant for Velor, even if no one else would ever know it.

But if there was anyone on Velor I *could* share my story with, it was Dar’yul. Only, I couldn’t tell him the most important part – about *me* and Mal’kar.

“There was a man on Tazzi named Kevin Galton. He was a good man and true, but I’d have never met him except for the discovery of a crashed Aurean ship equipped with a GAR.”

“A crashed ship so far from the Empire?”

“We too found that hard to explain. It might have been a setup, with Gazrall in on it, but Gazrall himself may have been set up by the Aureans – I think I know where he came from, and why he may have owed them, but I don’t have hard proof. Anyway, this isn’t about him, but about Kevin.

“As I said, he was a good man. But I needed him, to test the GAR. And I also had something on him: I was one of only two people to know that he was half Aurean – on his mother’s side; she was a deserter from the Empire.”

“Who was the other?”

“His on-and-off girlfriend. She was a Zetan, from a high-gravity world. A perfect match, or so I thought – until she betrayed him to an Aurean overseer named Mal’kar.”

“You have good cause for your hatred.”

“And likewise to hate myself, for having been fooled by Jana, having unwittingly become her instrument. If only I had seen – and warned Kevin. Everything I’ve done since then has been to make up for that, and to honor him.”

“Did you and Kevin...?”

“Oh yes; once I contrived to meet him – through his then ex of all people. I would *not* take no for an answer.”

“You could be very willful.”

“And out of control – we had an accident, and it was dumb luck that he wasn’t seriously injured, or even killed. That might have been the end of the story, but it turned out to be just the beginning.”

I paused for a moment, before getting to the really important part.

“I could be very impulsive, and not just about sex. I foolishly wanted to go too far in testing the GAR on myself, but he wouldn’t *let* me go that far. Kevin was the one to share intercepted Scalantran messages about the GAR with me, and I shared your own message with him. It was he who worked out how I could escape Tazzi without boarding a ship, how to extract the control chips so that I could carry them on my person. And my experience with the GAR under him prepared me to endure the pain the wormhole and keep my head about me to make the passage. If he hadn’t been there for me, I wouldn’t be here for you.”

“You can still be impulsive. That’s why I’m here for you.”

* * *

Back in Opara’s main office, the Scalantrans were playing a waiting game. The Factor General was carrying on a desultory conversation with Manesha, Farishan and Kinyam about her troubles with Velorian authorities, the delay in payment for import trade goods and slow delivery of export trade goods (including Companions).

Dar’yul interrupted to remind them that the High Council had the testimonies and hard evidence about the GARs in hand, and would feel obligated to share the evidence with the Senate.

“They can have *their* engineers examine the chips,” he said. “They don’t have to take our word. If the Senate needs its own copies, we can produce them. Trust me, we have things well in hand.”

One of the Factor General's staffers, who had been on break after struggling with the trade accounts for hours, suddenly rushed into the room.

"Something's happening at their Shrine," she cried. "It's on the capital newsnet. A flying man. And he isn't a Velorian!"

Chapter Ten

Nothing was well in hand. All bets were off.

"Nobody will even want to talk about our case until this is settled," Dar'yul said. "Yet if he's what he purports to be, we can only hope to get him on our side."

The flying man had claimed to be a messenger from the Galen, who sought to establish a new compact of some sort with Velor. The vid had kept replaying his arrival, from when he was first noticed descending out of the sky above the Shrine, and had likewise kept repeating his announcement:

"A new purpose has been given unto ye, ordained by Skietra herself, whose Appointed One approaches. Prepare ye the way of the Goddess, make straight her path."

"Could this possibly be some trick of the Aureans?" Kinyam asked.

"Aureans can't fly," Dar'yul reminded us.

"None that we know of," I added. "How much intelligence about the Empire do we have?"

I was thinking of the seductive power of Primes like Mal'kar as well as the origins of the heavy GAR. I'd been betrayed by hope before, and could only hope now that Velor itself would be spared such a betrayal. But Dar'yul didn't share my caution.

"Even Velorians can't fly on Velor," he pointed out. "And there isn't any doubt that he came under his own power. That's why he arrived naked."

That had been evident the first time the news was cast, before the newsnet cut away from his lower extremities, and after a while his... endowment... had been edited out of repeat screenings. Perhaps it made some of the ordinary Velorian men nervous.

There had been consternation among those gathered at the Shrine – traditional Believers and others on hand only to be seen as Believers.

But, to my surprise at least, Jasto'pur rose to the occasion – keeping his head when others seemed to be losing theirs. Proctors parting the unruly crowd before him, he approached the strange visitor calmly.

“May I have your name?” he asked, just as calmly.

“Alexios,” the man replied.

“I am First Senator Esbyorn Jasto'pur. If you, and she whom you speak for, have business here, you have business with the Senate. Please come with us.”

The senior senator had pointed to his ground car, and Alexios followed him and his driver. Our visitor might have flown, but forbore. That, like Jasto'pur's invitation, was a positive sign. In moments, they were headed across the desert to Vest'athy – thus avoiding the countless Velorians we imagined would soon be swarming to the Shrine.

“What can we do now?” I asked.

“Watch and wait,” said Dar'yul. “I'll have to return home when it is opportune – when I have a better idea how to deal with Koro'lat, and how both of us can deal with Jasto'pur and... whoever Alexios is bringing.”

“Should I be there?”

“Only if the High Council is prepared to hear your case... *our* case. But that has obviously been sidetracked for now, and may become just part and parcel of whatever action the Senate takes. If the Galen are truly involved, we will be reduced to only minor players.”

And there it stood. We could only await further developments.

All our eyes, Velorian and Scalantran alike, were glued to the screen. But the rest of that first day, the commentators had little further to report – rumors and speculation and one possible leak: that Alexios had come here from Olympia.

“He might be a proto,” I remarked. “The Galen created them there before us.”

“More likely not,” Kinyam contradicted me. “Our contacts insist that the protos are long gone, and that the Galen haven't even used Olympians as seeders for centuries.”

* * *

It all became academic the next day, when Aphro'dite made her appearance at the Shrine. It was sudden, but short – and mesmerizing. There had been confusion as to who and what Alexios was, skeptics who believed his appearance to be some sort of trick.

There were no doubters today.

The Velorian mob went wild, and not just because she was as naked as Alexios, and undeniably a Galen goddess. Something momentous had come to pass, and they could sense that history was in the making. But what *kind* of history?

Besides telling her name, Aphro'dite had only a few words before taking off for – under her own power – for the capital.

“I am come, as my Messenger foretold, to bring a new age and a new mission to Velor. My path is clear, as yours soon shall be.”

Beyond her enigmatic announcement, Aphro'dite herself offered only an equally enigmatic half smile.’



What did it all mean? What could the Galen want of us?

* * *

It was only a few hours later that Dar'yul got a call on his com. A moment later, he left the office to continue the conversation unheard by any of us, saying it was official business. When he returned, he refused to enlighten us.

"I have to return to headquarters immediately," he said.

I could only guess why, but it had to involve the High Council, and what else could that be about than whatever Alexios and/or Aphro'dite had told the Senate? That in turn meant it must have to do with the Companions.

Only, if Dar'yul couldn't talk about it with me, I surely shouldn't talk about it with the Scalantrans, or anyone at the Academy.

With Alexios and Aphro'dite out of sight, the Shrine was mostly deserted – except for the Priests. But the newsnet crew had hung on, in case were further developments there. Only, with the remaining curiosity seekers having nothing much to say that hadn't already been said, the commentators were reduced to sidelights about the history of the Shrine itself and the waning ranks of the priesthood.

Occasionally, they would find something of interest from other sources, such as the fact that Alexios had paraphrased a passage from one of the old Terran holy books, about a prophecy of the coming of God: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight his path."

It was probably the same holy book known on Tazzi; I had never read it, and the faith it represented had waned there. But the newsnet account had it that the ancient prophet had called himself a voice crying in the wilderness – hardly appropriate here, even if the Shrine was surrounded by the desert that covered much of Velor.

We could argue over where the new prophet or Aphro'dite herself had picked that up, but none of that bore how their coming would affect me, my fellow Companions, the Scalantrans or the ordinary people back home on Tazzi. That was what I *cared* about, I realized – the GAR mattered to *me* as a threat to *them*. Yet I never reckoned that my life before becoming a Companion would come back to haunt me. And when it surfaced on the newsnet, I was left helpless to defend myself or even explain myself/

My parents, Harl'a and Gen'a Tal'esta, had grown up in the desert community of Havitty and were part of a cult that still believed in the creation of Velorian women as procreators for the Galen. So the priesthood had preached hundreds of year ago, with some even having taught that our women had failed them and that the Galen had forsaken us in punishment. But most now gave that belief lip service at best.

Although the Tal'estas believed in the cult, they hadn't believed in poverty, and as bravas they had found jobs in the capital as clerks with External Affairs, which dealt with the Scalantrans and a few strategic Terran worlds. That involved trade, of course, but not the trade in Companions, which they considered an abomination.

To their great surprise and incredible pride they were granted a tall and beautiful Prima One daughter. It must have been pure chance, but they considered it a blessing from the Galen, even though it would make me eligible to become Companion. It was a high honor to raise a Prima, especially for lowly Bravas; they expected that I would marry another Prima, greatly increasing their chances of having a Prima grandchild, and looked forward to the Tal'estas one day becoming part of the ruling class...

But as I neared puberty, my parents had what they considered a revelation: that I should be the one to fulfill the old promise of the Galen. Having saved enough to live in relative comfort, they returned to Havitty and rejoined the cult. I was to be their Woman of Destiny, which meant I must never marry a mere Velorian, or even have sex with one. I was denied higher education – my right as a Prima – and forbidden even to leave the village. I was taught nothing of sex, and when I discovered how to pleasure myself they cursed before the other villagers, who agreed to shun me until I returned to purity and begged forgiveness.

"Pray that the Galen never hear of this, for *they* would never forgive you," Father said.

"You may think that as a Prima you can overcome any of us," Mother added. "But you can never overcome *all* of us. And so say we all."

The villagers made it clear they agreed.

First chance I got, I ran. And *ran*, and **ran**... If I couldn't outfight them, I could *outpace* them all. I caught the nearest public transport, and made my way to Vest'athy,

where I contacted External Affairs. The people there knew who I was, but not what had happened to me. I told them, and they agreed to contact Internal Affairs enforcement.

“Is there anything else we can do?” asked Yaxlan Jahr’ling, my parents’ former boss, who still worked with the Scalantrans.

“I want to enlist as a Companion. I want *off* this world.”

“The High Council may not approve a candidate your age, especially without a sponsor.”

“*Be* my sponsor. *Convince* them.”

And so it came to pass.

I knew at the outset that I was unlike the others, sold into virtual slavery to enrich the politically powerful. Their families were honored as patriots for having given up their daughters, whom they would never see again. But there would be no enrichment in my case – Yaxlan wouldn’t even hear of it. And the Tal’estas would never be honored.

I was done with Velor, and Velor was done with me. Or so I thought at the time. In my years on Tazzi, I found compensations and challenges, joy and disappointment. I came to know people who were nothing like Velorians, people whose lives were pitifully short compared to mine, but who could often make something admirable of those lives. I learned about the workings of human history, a history unburdened by the myth of some special purpose ordained by the Galen. I came to know and admire strength and loyalty among those people. Only later would I find weakness and betrayal, and not only in the Tazzians, but in myself...

I had paid for that, but now I had a chance to redeem myself, and Tazzi...

And then my past came back to haunt me: not my past there, but that here.

With the continued blackout on what was happening at the Senate, the newsnet was scrambling to find anything newsworthy. And it found a fringe cult that denounced the story of Alexios and Aphro’dite, despite all appearances of its reality, as an Aurean conspiracy. Worse than that, it found the Tal’estas, who condemned the High Council for allowing their daughter to be sold into slavery.

Sure enough, it was a day later that the newsnet people found *me*. Tracked me down to the Factor General’s office. I took the call reluctantly, but to have refused it...

How they learned about my return to Velor... well, Erin'lah... they wouldn't say, but I had my suspicions, especially since their spin on the story seemed to be that I was a deserter – they mentioned the case of Ju'lette, which had become notorious.



What I had become was *sad*.

It took several minutes for them to go through the list, and there would be a short time delay between Velor and Erin'lah to frame my response; but I knew that I couldn't cooperate even if I'd had more time to consider it.

"No comment."

I broke the connection. I felt really *hurt*.

But what else could I say, or do? I was out of contact with Dar'yul. I had no idea what he might advise.

What I had done would have to do, I hoped; but the newsnet people wouldn't let me off. They kept after me, leaving messages with leading questions. Why had I left my family to become a Companion? Had I broken my indenture without cause? Was I in league with Ju'lette? Had this all been a set up by the Aureans? Or by the Scalantrans?

And they treated my response on the air as an admission of guilt.

I finally got back to their head office, and left a message of my own.

"I know the source of your lies – a certain official of the Academy, suborned by an Aurean agent. I shall inform the High Council."

I'd already known that Jes'kor had yet to return to his post, but had assumed he had only become a party to the secret discussions of the High Council – after all, they bore on the future role of Companions, and their training at the Academy would be part of that. But the Council would surely never have sanctioned his malicious leaks to the newsnet.

As it happened, I needn't have protested to the Council, which responded to my complaint with an unsigned message: *Action has already been taken*. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Nary a hint about the substance of their deliberations, but I hadn't expected any. My part in this story appeared to be over. For all my regret at that, perhaps it was for the best in the long run. And yet I couldn't entirely put it past me.

* * *

I continued to watch the newsnet casts, but after a few days they had begun to take a different turn.

No more sensational news flashes. Instead there were serious documentaries about Velorian history before and after contact with the Scalantrans, about the break with the Aureans and the mutual hostility that ensued, even about the Companions. It was all treated in a very sober manner, even the legendary role of the Galen – although there was no hint of contradicting that legend. I took it as a sign that talks between Aphro'dite and the Senate and the High Council were coming to a head, that history of a new kind was in the making.

I had taken a different turn myself, spending most of my time at the Academy. It was business as usual there. Nobody seemed to miss Jes'kor, even his administrative staff – which wouldn't talk about him, or what was happening back home, although the candidates as well as the instructors had followed the news and wondered how it might affect them.

Even the lottery boys followed the news, having been deep taught in Velorian. Ivry Rakhmenty, who came from Selene, even had a sidelight to offer – that passage Alexios had paraphrased had to do with a prophecy by an Evrei named Ikaya that was interpreted by the Christians as foreseeing the advent of Iisus. I could tell he was using his native language's words for Jew and Jesus; I didn't recognize Ikaya, but he must be in what the few remaining Tazzian believers called the Old Testament.

The boy looked at me lustfully; no doubt he was hoping for a romp as a reward, but I was in no mood for that – for safe sex with a Terran. And there was still Kal'Entor. We could fuck savagely and come explosively, over and over. Yet in the moments between, there was a sense of inner peace, as if all were right with us and with the world. That solace was as important to me as the pleasure.

Only, I knew that all was *not* right with the world, or with other worlds.

Kal'Entor had suggested between our sexual bouts that I could teach combat from the perspective of a Companion who had actually experienced it – which he assumed I had. And indeed I had, but not in the way he doubtless imagined – taking out local would-be assassins or common enemy ships and common soldiers. And it was only at the end that my own combat had been up close and personal – I dared not tell him about that, and he had dropped the subject.

Yet future Companions might well have to deal with Aurean Primes, face to face. For all I knew, some had already died in such encounters. Could I act now to save their lives and help thwart the Empire's plans? Was I even capable of teaching them to face Primes in mortal combat when I had nearly failed to do so myself? Could training alone prepare them for the challenge, without a moment like that I had faced?

That moment was burned into my brain. The moment that Mal'kar told me, after the nuking of the commune where Kevin had taken refuge, that he had acted against a fanatic who threatened the peace only we could and must bring to Tazzi. It was if I had awakened from a dream, and known it for a nightmare – a nightmare that I could blame only on my own betrayal. I felt a sudden loathing for myself as well as for him.

Yet the look on his face was earnest, and seemingly loving. He believed I was still in thrall to his mindfoolery – a thrall so powerful that I now wonder if he and his kind had learned something of mind control from the diaboli. Mal'kar didn't realize I had awakened until I my hands closed on his throat. He tried to break free, but my newborn rage gave me a power he hadn't reckoned on and couldn't resist, although his raw strength was a match for my own. He flailed and flailed with his arms and legs, trying desperately to free himself, but nothing could avail him; I squeezed his neck with all my might until it broke – and that was the end for him.

But not for me. I was still haunted by the memory of my temptation by the Aurean enemy that had cost a dear friend's life. With that on my conscience, could I be or did I deserve to be of any help to the Companions, or to Velor, beyond my role in delivering the secrets of the GAR.

I couldn't talk about my secret shame, even with Kal'Entor. There were Christian priests on Tazzi to whom people could confess their sins, but I had nobody to confess to here – in any case, I didn't believe in priests, theirs or ours. I had nobody to turn to – at the Academy, or a hostel at the spaceport, which was where I was now spending most of my time.

One fine morning, I heard from Dar'yul, advising that I should expect an important visitor. I should meet them the next evening at the Academy's scrumbles field, but that I shouldn't tell anybody – just turn a light on, facing away the rest of the Academy.

“We’ll explain everything then,” he signed off. “The Senate and the High Council have done their part, and now you will have a chance to do yours.”

I couldn’t imagine what he meant. I had brought the design chips and control chips for the GAR. My part was done. I had nothing to look forward to.

They’ll send me back to Tazzi, I thought. Surely free of my indenture to Gazrall. But who will acquire my contract? Just the highest bidder? A new plutocrat to be trusted no better than the old? A syndicate? A new government?

I’d have no say in the matter. Yet I should count my blessings, I tried to tell myself. What did it matter where I ended up? My mission was done. The political tide was turning; the news had already hinted at that. I should let that tide carry me where it would.

Chapter Eleven

One thing I could do before that was report to Opara, even if I had nothing to tell her save that Velor was evidently about to take action against the Aurean menace. I had no idea how that might affect the Scalantrans, or even whether the Senate would put an end to the measures it had taken against the *Far Wanderer* after Ju’lette’s escape aboard the *Galactic Roamer*. At least the *Bountiful Voyager* wasn’t affected by them, although she had feared at first that it might be held responsible for aiding a deserter – me.

Back at the Academy, I saw that everyone was excited about what the future held – not only the staff and instructors but the candidates, and even the lottery boys. They would be too busy keeping up with the latest news to venture outside – no further than the sex shacks, at least, and certainly not as far as the scrumbles field. They sensed that the political climate had changed, and were awaiting word on who would replace Jes’kor as superintendent – they hadn’t been briefed, but they could put two and two together, even without me sharing the secret message from the High Council.

I couldn’t enlighten them any further, even if I’d known what it was all about. In any case, I had to get to the field to meet Dar’yul and whoever he was bringing – most likely First Senator Jasto’pur, with official word of my fate. Just a courtesy call; after all I’d done, they didn’t want to be seen with or known to be meeting with me.

Dusk came, and there was no sign of a ship or flitter. But in the heavens above, by the glow of the light I’d turned on, in, I could suddenly make out Dar’yul and—

Aphro'dite!

Had she actually flown the High Councillor through space all the way from Velor? That could have endangered him, I imagined – he wasn't even a Prima. But as they came in for a landing, I could see that he seemed hale, and even in high spirits; the Galen envoy who had borne him in her arms must have had access to greater knowledge of Velorian nature than we ourselves – who had never flown at all, let alone ventured into airlessness while living in a gold field...

When they landed, facing the light, she set him down gently on his feet. I expected her to introduce herself, but Dar'yul was the first to speak.

"I had to use all my powers of persuasion to bring her here," he said. "I have had the honor, and I must now depart. The rest is up to her... and you.:

I could barely hear him as he took his leave. My eyes were riveted on Aphro'dite, as were hers on me.



To see her on the vid had been one thing; to see her right before me quite another. She was of the *Galen*, she *must* be; and I but a remote descendant of their creations. She was our very mythology, but in the flesh rather than in mere legends handed down by the Priests. It was as if one of the Christians on Tazzi were to meet Jesus himself. Only the Jesus they believed in had never been; the Galen *had* been, and *were*, and here I was face to face with the living proof.

A thrill ran through my entire body, at once electric and erotic. I longed to make love with her as an act of fealty as well as joy. I would gladly serve her, however humbly – for I felt myself unworthy – if only to learn the truth of why the Galen had created us, and then forsaken us for so many centuries. Was her Advent a sign they had finally found a purpose for us? Yet, if so, why was *I* here? I had taken no part in what transpired on Velor. Would she deign to enlighten me only as a favor to Dar'yul and the High Council?

So thinking and so feeling, I was taken aback by her first words to me.

“Your sponsor is indeed persuasive,” she said. “That is why I am here – to tell you what the world will learn tomorrow: that a new age has dawned, and that you can be the first of your kind to help bring it into being. You can be the very first Protector.”

Protector? As Companions, I and others had been sworn to protect those who held our indentures, and had often chosen to extend our protection to others we cared for. But that couldn't be what Aphro'dite meant now.

“I don't understand,” I confessed.

“The time has come for you to understand, as it will for others to be chosen among your fellow Velorians in due course.”

And she laid it all out for me. The age of Companions was over, and that of what she called Protectors was about to begin. Those chosen as Protectors would undergo a process called Enhancement, through which they would become far more powerful than Velorian primes. They would be capable of interstellar flight, transiting wormholes with ease, and invulnerable to the Aureans' most awesome new weapons.

Protectors would be assigned to any worlds ready to accept them, as defenders of those worlds against the Empire. The High Council would see to their recruitment, training and supervision, even as it had with Companions. It would do the same for Messengers, enhanced male Prime Velorians whose duties would be to travel to and from allied worlds

served by Protectors, to maintain official communications and serve their intimate needs – sexual contact with natives was to be discouraged, albeit not entirely forbidden.

The Senate, meanwhile, was ready to authorize a Naval force, both to defend Velor itself and engage the enemy elsewhere. It was also establishing a diplomatic corps, to manage relations with allied and neutral worlds. And plans were afoot for an interstellar conference to work on the creation and financing of a confederacy of allied worlds called the Enlightenment – with the loss of the Companion trade, Velor would need a new source of income to fund it all. Apart from supporting the Enlightenment, member worlds would remain free to manage their own affairs – the only intervention would be against Aurean raiders and infiltrators. That was the scenario Aphro'dite was pitching to me, at the behest of the Senate. Or had it all been her idea to begin with?

“Our new interstellar order has to be founded on *trust*,” she argued. “Trust in Velor, trust in the coming Enlightenment and trust in its most visible defenders – the Protectors like yourself. You will serve far from here, as will those who follow you. But you will be at the center of it all.”

The center of it all... How could I live up to such a responsibility? I, who had come so close to handing over a world to the Aureans? Here before Aphro'dite, knowing what she stood for, I was overcome with shame. I had deceived everyone here, even Dar'yul, whom she had called my sponsor. Neither was a priest, nor I a Christian, and yet I knew I had to make confession.

I lowered my eyes in contrition, then raised them again to Aphro'dite. I looked into myself to find the right words, and steeled myself to say them.

“The time has come for me to tell of myself what must be told,” I began. “Hear me now, and judge me accordingly. I cannot be the first, or even the last of your Protectors. I am not worthy of either the honor or the power that goes with it.”

And it all came pouring out – the *truth* about how I had been seduced by Mal'kar, betrayed Kevin, betrayed the very world I should have protected, even if that had not been my mandate as a Companion. Nothing I had done since, even delivering the secrets of the GAR to Velor, could make up for that. I wanted no role, nor could I accept one, in the Galens' new interstellar order.

“Lastly, do not judge Dar'yul,” I said. “He never knew the worst.”

Aphro'dite seemed expressionless for a moment, then smiled.

"You pass the test," she said. "As Alexios did."

"*Test?*"

"You are not the first to have failed, among Terrans or Velorians or even Galen. I have found that the true test of any being is to admit their failures and learn from them. What you have learned will stand you in good stead as a Protector. Moreover, you *must* be the first because you are *here*, **now**, and what you have accomplished in your journey home is fresh in the minds of the Senate as well as the High Council – and will be known to all Velorians in the news tomorrow. You are to become a mythical figure – like me."

"I don't *want* to become a mythical figure. I just want to do my part."

"That *is* your part, or rather a *part* of your part. The rest will be up to you, when you return to Tazzi. You will have to assess whatever situation you find there, and – without taking power, mind you – inspire the Tazzians to live up to their best potential in dealing with it. To begin with, you have to win acceptance from them, to win their world over as an ally, and a potential member of the Enlightenment – without mentioning that concept until the time is ripe."

Would the time *ever* be right for such a grandiose scheme? Did the Senate really have any idea how difficult it would be or how long it would take? Did Aphro'dite? She didn't seem to have any qualms, as she continued her overture.

"You must be ready, be fully empowered. Only I can accomplish that, as I did for Alexios as my messenger, that he could make as dramatic an appearance as possible to set the stage for mine. It's called Enhancement, and he has undergone it twice – the first time to his regret, the second to the same end that you are about to embark on. It has all taken careful planning, but I have left myself open to advice from others, as in your case."

As in Alexios' case, too, she revealed now.

"I had meant for him to become First Messenger, just as you will be First Protector," she said. "But I met with stubborn objections from the High Council – most vocally from Koro'lat, but even Dar'yul shared the consensus that a non-Velorian could not be given such an iconic role. The Senate agreed, and I conceded – for the sake of the mission. But where can Alexios go now?"

"That is up to him."

Aphro'dite was playing with me, I knew, but I no longer cared. She was looking at me in a different manner than when Dar'yul had been with us, looking at me with lust – I could sense her pheromones for the first time; in a moment, we were both totally naked. Her nipples were engorged, and she was wet down below.

So was I.

Sex between women was nothing new for Velorians. Companions had indulged in it from the start on the long journeys to their destination worlds, and often again once free of their indentures – even if they had to wear gold, as with men. There were women who could appreciate us better than the native men on some worlds. And on worlds where there was more than one Companion – a growing number, thanks to the High Council's obsessive drive to make the program more profitable...

But that was there, and this was here, as I felt the heat of passion. And when I embraced Aphro'dite, she was literally hot – hot enough to burn a mere Terran, but only an aphrodisiac to a woman who could bathe in fire. As I rained kisses down her body, biting her nipples along the way, she moaned with pleasure. And when I reached her intimate center, and began drinking her torrid juices, she screamed loud enough to be heard all the way back at the Academy – I didn't think about it at the time, or even care, but the people there could have taken it for a lottery boy and a candidate at a sex shack. It was the same when she went down on me, and I didn't care.

It was only after we brought each other off several times that I felt an even more intense wave of heat arise *within* me, spreading upwards and downwards from my pelvis, and growing ever more powerful – almost painful. She could tell what was happening, and reassured me: "It's working," she said.

That was the last thing I heard before losing consciousness.

I awakened the next morning, feeling like a new woman – which I realized I now was. Aphro'dite was there to greet me, and brief me.

"It takes longer with a Prime and a Terran," she said. "And it's touch and go – the Terran may be enhanced, or he may die during enhancement fever. Alexios was lucky in that regard; he was genetically compatible. So was Tassos, the lover who took a chance with Ju'lette – you must have heard about that. But there may have been any number of failures that have gone unrecorded."

“Thanks for telling me,” I responded sarcastically.

“I didn’t want to spoil the mood last night. And it won’t happen again. Between us, that is. There will be other Protector candidates to enhance. And Messenger candidates. I’ll be happily bisexual. But I’ll also be looking after the whole process – we’ll have a new Academy on Velor itself, with courses in astrophysics, galactic history and other subjects of vital interest to Protectors – including celestial navigation, which I understand you had to work out for yourself. Plus more intensive combat training here. There may be still more to come, as called for by circumstances. But for now, we must away.”

I looked around, and asked after Dar’yul.

“He’s staying behind at the Academy, to bring them the good news from the High Council: Kal’Entor has been promoted to superintendent.”

“But—”

“That’s right, they’ve never filled that position from within the ranks. But now they will... As for you today, it’s off to Velor – where your command performance awaits.”

“Performance?”

“For the media – and the people of Velor. Jasto’pur and Koro’lat and the rest will be making speeches about their plans for the Protectors and the Navy and all that – but it’s *you* ordinary Velorians will want to see. The very incarnation of the future, rather than mere words about it, however earnest.”

“So I just stand there looking pretty?”

“And deliver an inspiring speech about how eager you are to embark on your new mission. Or that was the whole of it until last night. But I got a call while you were asleep. There’s been a breakthrough. Now you’ll get the chance stand there looking invulnerable, and *showing* it.”

“What?”

“I heard from Dar’yul while you were asleep. He had found a group of engineers at the Power Authority in Vest’athy, and set them to work on the design chips you brought. And just last night – it was pure serendipity – they made a breakthrough. They’ve done it – produced a working GAR!”

“Skietra!”

“Don’t blaspheme,” she chided me, but with a wink.

“Anyway, it’s time to head for Velor, and you need a lift. When we get there, let them see you share the groundlings’ awe towards me. But it’s all right to give due credit where credit is due... which is not to the Senate. The Senate is, alas, hard to put to carry out the plans we have made – but you can unite Velor to make every effort.”

I couldn’t make it there by myself, even after Enhancement. If the Protectors and Messengers were rendered immune to gold, it could cause problems... But it was only a short time before my date with destiny, and no ship could get me there in time. And so it was that Aphro’дите bore me to my homeworld – a world I not seen for many years. It grew before me now in my eyes, and in my heart...

Chapter Twelve



There were tens of thousands of Velorians at the scrumbles field and millions more were watching on the newsnets. The land beyond where I was to make my appearance

had been cleared to the horizon, although only a few officials knew why. Proctors had orders to chase off any who gathered there... and later make themselves scarce.

Time to show and tell... or rather, tell and show. But the powers that be wanted to run it all. So I stood there smiling and looking pretty. By this time I knew they had more to tell than show.

Jasto'pur, First of the Senate, took a stance in front of me, ready to address the crowd and the world. Dar'yul had warned that he would try to upstage me, to make this *his* day, but I knew that no matter what he or others said and did on this historic occasion, it would end up being mine. *They* would be the ones upstaged, and never know it until that very moment – Aphro'dite and Dar'yul had seen to that.

I could bide my time as Jasto'pur began the speechifying...

"This day we honor our creators the Galen, who have come to us in our hour of need. You have all seen Aphro'dite, who has spoken to the world and ushered in a new era, in which Velor shall rise to its own defense and the defense of others menaced by the Aurean Empire. Our Navy will be the mightiest the Galaxy has ever seen, and our new corps of Protectors will meet and defeat the Aureans face to face on the worlds to which the High Council will assign them. The first of their number will appear here today, but she will be far from the last to serve Velor by serving the worlds they shall protect..."

Nothing about the diplomatic corps, or organizing an interstellar conference; the Senate was obviously playing for time. Instead, he went on in the triumphalist vein about the Protectors, without even mentioning my name, although he did credit Aphro'dite for having recommended a returned Companion to the High Council as First Protector, and praised her fulsomely for her commitment to remain here to see to the "creation" of future Protectors and their training at the new Academy to be established by the Council.

Jasto'pur's closing remarks signaled that it was time for Koro'lat to take his place and speak his piece.

It was mostly about housekeeping details, like the reorganization of the training program on Erin'lah until the Academy could be established planetside. Any P-1 woman who had reached the age 16 could be "chosen" to become a Protector – meaning it would not be *her* choice, although he didn't dwell on that. Freed Companions who had returned home could become Protectors, as could those now in training as Companions, once they

had been enhanced by Aphro'dite. He avoided any mention of Companions who were still in service, or trained as such but already outbound to other worlds.

*So they don't want to give up the income from the Companion trade **quite** yet, I thought.*

That might even be the Senate's position, with Koro'lat set up to take the blame if the interstellar conference didn't come off... He made brief mention of the Messengers, who would all be volunteers, and free Protectors from any need to seek intimate comfort from Terrans – but didn't address the Aurean propaganda about the Companions trade being slave trade. From what Dar'yul had told me when I first met him on Erin'lah, Koro'lat himself was reluctant to give ground on any issue. He had been *forced*.

I wasn't about to give ground either as Aphro'dite herself, who had waited outside the stadium, made a grand entrance by flying to the staging area – something no Velorian, even I, could do – to introduce me as her choice for First Protector. She didn't call it a mere "recommendation," but neither did she chide Jasto'pur or Koro'lat for doing so. It was time for a measure of diplomacy as well as firmness, on my part as well as hers – and we both knew that diplomacy would be essential to the success of the program itself.

"Hear Vespyr, and let her bear witness to what it will mean to be a Protector," she told the crowd and the world. "We have planned together for this historic occasion." As if the Senate and High Council deserved the credit!

Now it was finally my turn. I gave a nod to the Power Authority engineers in front of me, who were manning the GAR and hadn't attracted any attention. They were dressed as newsnet reporters, and the GAR itself was disguised as a recording device. The actual newsnet crews were stationed further back in the stadium and in the stands, and assumed that this other crew must have been ordered by the Senate and the High Council to get flattering close-ups of their speakers – and the proctors had been told to keep the area between them and my own position clear. Nobody but Aphro'dite and Dar'yul and I, the engineers and a few key officials sworn to secrecy knew what was about to happen.

"My name is Vespyr Tal'esta," I introduced myself. "I was born and raised on Velor, but I sought to become a Companion because I wanted to see what lay beyond. For me, it was never a matter of the indenture itself, or the man who held it, or the joy of flight, or

the other advantages of life beyond our gold field, but the *experience* of another world – a world unlike ours, but just as real.

“And there are thousands of other worlds, inhabited by our distant cousins. We are one people, but they are many, for they are descendants of many nations of Old Earth, some of which no longer exist on our common Mother Planet. These other worlds have their own histories and customs and cultures, of which we would know little or nothing but for the Companions who have served there for the last 350 Terran years,

“I myself have served on one such world, and I came to love it. And yet I came to leave it, for it was taken over by an ally of the Empire. We Companions are trained to deal with the Aureans, but I could not remain on Tazzi to do so, for they now have a fearsome new weapon the Garzoldan Assault Rifle, or GAR. It was created for specific purpose of destroying Velorians, destroying us, and we are helpless against it.

“I made it my mission to bring proof of this new weapon and its effects to Velor. And I owe that proof to a man who gave his life to study a GAR that had been found on Tazzi under suspicious circumstances. It was he who recorded the control and data chips that I brought with me, and had duplicated and submitted to the High Council, which has shared them with the Senate. It was he who went into hiding after destroying that GAR, but was tracked down – and killed with hundreds in a commune that had sheltered him.

“Yet the Empire had supplied another GAR to the government of the man who held my indenture. It was intended for me, and I had no choice but to flee. And were it not for Kevin Galton – remember that name – I would have had nothing to show for it. Even now, GARs are probably on their way to other worlds that depend on Companions for their defense. And Velorians are not their only targets; the Scalantrans and Vendorians who maintain trade and supply the ships to carry it on are in grave danger.

“And yet we can overcome that danger. That is why Aphro'dite has come to create the Protectors, who will be immune to the new weapon – giving *them* the power to carry on the war against the Empire wherever it strikes. Make no mistake about it; those other worlds out there need us, but we also need them. We need the Scalantrans, we need the Vendorians. We cannot overcome the Aureans in isolation, but rather in alliance. More needs to be done to accomplish that, but I am about to reveal what has already been

accomplished by our own engineers, who have recreated a GAR based on those chips I brought. You are about to see it in action.”

I paused for a few moments, as Aphro'dite chased the other speakers away from the staging area, then shouted the code phrase: ***“M'atra Zar!”***

The engineers fired, and the GAR beam hit me squarely in the chest.

I still remembered the pain I'd felt from Kevin's test shots, but there was no pain today – only a pleasant warmth like that Terrans had told me they experienced in bright sunshine on a summer day. Only whatever they might be wearing wouldn't be instantly vaporized by the sun. And within seconds, I felt a tingling in my breasts and between my legs that spread to the rest of my naked body and...

Skietra!

I was not only instantly naked, but *coming*. Coming in front of the multitude in the stadium and a many times greater multitude watching the newsnets.

The newscasters must be zooming in to show the ecstasy on my face, my swollen breasts with their erect nipples, even my juices dripping down my legs. It was way out of my control. The engineers realized that they and I must have both misjudged an enhanced Velorian body's response to the GAR, and shut it off.

It was then that I saw a figure familiar to me only from those newsnets approach me, bearing a cloak, which he wrapped about me. I continued to shudder with orgasms until I finally came down, but at least they were out of public view. I looked around for Aphro'dite, but she had disappeared – perhaps to consult with the Senate and High Council, whose members had also taken their leave.

“Begone!” he shouted to the madding crowd and the newsnet people, then caught me up in his arms and bore me away to the open country beyond the field that had been cleared by the proctors. Where we came down was far out of sight from the spectators and the vid crews.

I looked at the man I recognized as Alexios, the man who had played the role of herald to Aphro'dite. He looked at me, his face one of concern. But Mal'kar had shown seeming concern. He was beautiful, even fully-clothed; but so had Mal'kar been. No doubt he was a great lover, and a great charmer. But Mal'kar had excelled at both. How could I

trust this man? Had he truly come to my aid, or was this just part of a game his mistress was playing on me? Would he make a play for me now that he had me all alone with him?

Only he didn't make a play. He didn't make a move. And then he began to talk.

"She knew this would happen," he said in a soft voice. "It was part and parcel of your enhancement, of augmenting your orgone energy. It was in her interest to make the greatest possible impact out of your appearance. She believes in what she calls creative mythology. She created a role for me in her Advent, and now she has created a role for you – one calculated to become a new legend. You'll go down in history, but not for what you had to say – only for what your world saw. And yet, what you had to say makes you what you truly are, what you bring to your mission as First Protector. Those who understand that, those who teach the Protectors to come, will be your true legacy."

This was nothing like I had expected. I was speechless.

"Today may have been necessary, as she believes," Alexios continued. "Only, not sufficient. Dealing with reality is a much harder. I have ideas of my own about that, and I suspect that you do too – based on your experience, on what brought you here and what you have brought about. We need to talk about that, and talk about the future, a future I could share with you on Tazzi – if you consent. I have nowhere else to go, now that my role in Aphro'dite's performance here is done with, but I won't get any further into that unless you consent. We have both been used, for however great a purpose, and the last thing I want to become is a user."

I decided to take him at his word... for now."

"We should both talk with Dar'yul, who spoke for me to the High Council and the Senate and won them over – although their support has been reluctant, to say the least; you must have gleaned that from Jasto'pur and Koro'lat. But not here. At the Academy, on Erin'lah."

"I have to confess that I don't know the way."

"I presume you know that Erin'lah is the second moon out, past Erin'dor?"

"Erin'dor is where Aphro'dite and I first landed. She somehow knew your people hadn't been using it. We came in cloaked; didn't want to be spotted."

Cloaked? Never mind – back to the business at hand.

“I’ve never flown there myself, of course, but I’ve watched from ships I’ve taken. It’s on the far side, not far from the spaceport, in a greener area than most of the moon. But with no sound in space. I’ll have to guide you by hand signals, and point out where to land.”

Only, there was something I hadn’t thought of until now.

“I’ll have to alert Dar’yul. Do you have a perscom?”

Alexios suddenly looked embarrassed.

“Never mind,” I said. “I’ll com him from there. We’d better take our leave before those ordinary Velorians back at the stadium come looking. We’ll have a lot more to talk about while we’re waiting for him. But as for anything else between us... no promises.”

“So be it,” he said, an odd catch in his voice.

Was something bothering him? Besides the obvious?

Whatever. It was time to take flight, into the wild black yonder.

Chapter Thirteen

It wasn’t all that hard...

We found our way the spaceport, but didn’t land there. It would be up to the High Council and even the Senate to deal with the Scalantrans, and I didn’t relish the thought of trying to explain to them about the spectacle at the stadium – if they hadn’t seen it on vid, they’d surely have heard about it.

We were spotted coming in for a landing at the Academy by one of the Candidates, and she quickly alerted the others, and the instructors – and Kal’Entor, who had been at his office, but ran outside when he heard the commotion, along with his staff.

I was greeted with wild cheers.

They’d all watched my demonstration. Why should I have imagined otherwise? But they weren’t the least bit embarrassed. They were *proud* of me.

“I can’t wait to be a Protector like you!” exclaimed one of the candidates. “Those Aureans had better watch out!”

“And I can’t wait for one to shoot me with a GAR!” yelled another. “Will they ever be fucking surprised when I cum! Still, I’m glad to hear about to the Messengers – it’ll be great to have real live Velorians to fuck. GARs can’t love us.”

The two of them introduced themselves as Isphana and Zolusha, and the others echoed their sentiments. I was about to introduce Alexios, but the news had taken care of that, of course.

“We saw him fly you out of the stadium before they cut the feed,” Isphana said.

“We need to get Dar’yul up here to explain the whole program better than we can – neither of us was in on all the details worked out by the powers that be in Vest’athy.”

I turned to Kal’Entor.

“We need to—”

“Be my guest,” he said, and ushered us into his office.

I placed the call. It took a while to reach him, but he understood, and agreed to come as soon as possible. “I see you had some help getting there,” Dar’yul remarked.



He could see Alexios on the vid feed, of course. But unlike us, he needed a ship. It would take a couple of days at best. That left us with time on our hands. Time for frank talk. We headed south, into the wasteland – out of sight and out of hearing by everyone at the Academy. Let them make of it what they would. We walked side by side, saying nothing, until I decided the time had come.

“Who are you, really?”

“I was an ordinary man, on one of the Seeded worlds – she has advised me not to tell you or anyone else which. Until, by sheer chance, I became more than that.”

“Enhancement.”

“By a former Companion. I had been her lover for years. Neither of us had known that such a thing was possible; when it happened it made us both act crazy... for a time. We had decided to keep it secret from everyone else, but we couldn’t hide my failure to age forever. Because I was kin to the ruling family, although not an heir to the ruler, it was feared the knowledge of my altered nature could have posed a threat to the political order. And so she decided to exile me, arranging to fake my death. Just like that; ‘so be it.’”

“And then?”

“I wandered. There was no place I could call home for long, none I could call friend – or lover. I once took a chance with a Proto, only I... killed her. It was accidental but...”

Why is he telling me this?

He looked at me sadly, and could sense my question.

“I had to confess to Aphro’dite,” he said. “And I have to confess to you.”

He filled me in about Zakiti, who had actually begged for his company, and had to all appearances demonstrated that it would be safe with her, only... about how he had to flee Ishtar with the Scalantrans and again take up wandering, working as a bodyguard and having brief affairs here and there with freed Companions.

“We have something in common,” I told him. “I caused the death of an innocent man, a good man, on Tazzi. His name was Kevin. I was thinking of him just now, of how I have to live with what I did. Like you. And the blame in my case is greater than yours. I confessed it to Aphro’dite, and she told me that you had done likewise. Passing a test was the way she put it. But was she just playing with us, to entrap us in her own agenda. I’m too upset; I don’t want to talk any more about it right now.”

I especially didn't want to confide in him about Mal'kar. It had been a betrayal, not just a tragedy. Could he ever forgive me for *that*? In time, perhaps. But this was not the time. Our relationship, whatever it might become, was too bleak now, like the wasteland around us. Alexios somehow understood.

"Confession comes hard for you, I know, as it did for me," he said now. "But without it, there can be no trust. If we cannot be straight about the past, there is no hope for the future."

"Can we trust *her*? Is she straight about who she is and what she intends?"

"She never told *me* the truth," he said. "At least, not the whole truth – about the Galen and the Elders. I can't swear that she is a Galen at all, even if she is serving them now. I do know that she's a shapeshifter, I have seen that with my own eyes – but I'm not supposed to tell anyone else. You're the first... and the last. Does that tie in with anything *you* know?"

"Nothing."

"And she said she had once posed as the Goddess of Love in ancient Hellas – do you know about Hellas?"

"Only from Terran history I learned from the Scalantrans. History from long before our time, long before there were any seeded worlds."

"We don't know a lot about our past, do we?"

"Even about our *own* world of Velor – the gold core. It must have been here for as long as the planet itself – millions, or billions of years. Before the Galen and the Elders, maybe even the Old Galactics. Only, *why*? Velorians take it for granted, but there aren't any other worlds like it. I asked once, when I was training as a Companion. Nobody knew; nobody even seemed to care."

"*I* care," Alexios said. "I want to learn all I can about the past, and the present – that's the only way to envision the future."

"My future has already been envisioned for me. By Aphro'dite. By the Senate and the High Council. It wasn't what I expected when I set out to bring proof about the threat of the GAR, but I freely accept their decision. Despite the way they staged things at the stadium. I have a mission to carry out, just as I did before."

I had to swallow my pride, yet it was Alexios who had reservations.

“But they aren’t infallible. Even Aphro’dite can’t foresee everything. She told me as much; and even that there was a Directive from the Galen not to interfere with the social and cultural structure of Velor itself. Things there will be as they have always been – save for the Protectors, save for such other measures as the men of Velor may undertake.”

He pointed at the sky.

“But out *there*, we might play a part.”

“**We?**”

“We can put our minds together. As I told you before, I have nowhere else to go. Aphro’dite has no further use for me, now that she has accomplished her purpose. And there is no one else I could go *with*. I can’t become a Messenger; the High Council would never sanction that, and I rather doubt she even suggested it.”

“She *did*, as a matter of fact. At least, she *told* me she did.”

“She’s been having her way with both of us, it would seem. Perhaps she imagines herself as a matchmaker.”

“And you want to have *your* way with me?”

“Desperately. I’m not affected by gold; that makes me deadly to any Terran, and even some protos, I learned that to my cost – and the cost of a woman’s life. I might take to wandering again, finding jobs here and there, and casual affairs with Velorians. But I don’t want to go back to that life. I want more. I want to share my life and thoughts and not just... Please hear me out.”

I hadn’t let on; I *dared* not let on that I wanted to have *my* way with him. How could I *not* want a man even more powerful than a Protector like me – a man who was *immune* to gold. I might have to hold myself back even with Kal’Entor, now that I was enhanced – but never with Alexios. I was *aching* to fuck him. And I’d already known he wanted me – my tachyon vision had revealed that back at the Academy.

Only now he began talking about something he called Cosmognosis, and how it had to do with the entire evolution and purpose – if any – of intelligent life in the universe. I couldn’t make sense of it, to tell the truth, and yet I was fascinated by his accounts of the planets he had visited – and not only those populated by Ordinaries, like Tazzi. He had been to First Generation worlds – Amun and Ishtar and Olympia, which had been

seeded by the Galen themselves after their first visits to Earth in the guise of gods and goddesses, and had become sites of their first experiments with protos...

I couldn't take it all in; there was so *much* of it. And yet I was reminded of my own experiences – if limited to brief stopovers – on Selene and Trpcic and Irukan and Estor. I knew a bit about others from the Scalantrans and their contacts. I longed to hear more; there might be lessons to be learned about how to deal with whatever the situation was back on Tazzi. Not that I was supposed to deal with internal affairs, as opposed to Aurean attack or infiltration, in the capacity of Protector; but perhaps I could work with Tazzians of good will, and perhaps Alexios could help – he was a free agent, could become a citizen. Like...

Like Kevin.

Alexios stopped in mid-sentence, seeing that I looked startled.

"I was thinking about Tazzi," was all I could say. "About what needs to be done there."

And I left it at that, for the time being.

* * *

When Dar'yul arrived a day later, some things were still up the air. Alexios and I were on the training ground outside the office, along with the candidates – we still called them that – the instructors, and Superintendent Kal'Entor. The lottery boys – would there still be lottery boys for Protectors? – had been banished. Protectors weren't supposed to consort with Ordinaries, although that might be winked at.

"For starters, there's the initiation of Protectors," Dar'yul informed us. "Aphro'dite wants it carried out at a monumental new Hall of Protectors in Vest'athy, and a majority of the Council is inclined to agree. It's all about making a Big Impression. But the Senate wants both initiation and training to be up here. I'd just as soon that were the case, but I'm willing to go along with Koro'lat and his allies."

"Why should the Senate care one way or the other?" asked Kal'Entor.

"Again, it's about making an impression. The Senate created the High Council in the first place to distance itself from the Companion program – which, after all, involved selling our women into slavery for what they thought would be the rest of their lives. We had no idea that they would outlive their indentures, or become more than concubines.

But the Hall of Protectors will be a constant reminder of its new role, whereas the Senate will be known only for offworld diplomacy and conventional military forces. And those take time to deploy, whereas Protectors will be deployed almost immediately.”

“Hurrah for us!” yelled Isphana, who drew cheers from the other candidates. Did they really know what they were getting into, or just sharing a fantasy? Their training as Companions hadn’t included the realities of politics in the Velorian system, as opposed to distant encounters with Aureans.

Not *their* problem that the Senate had to make up for the loss of revenue from the Companion trade. Dar’yul was trying to enlighten them, but he wasn’t up to speed on what might be accomplished – if anything.

“They’re hoping to get help from the Scalantrans, in return for protection,” he said. “Maybe even the Vendorians. Of course, there’s this Conference they want to hold, for worlds allied with us – but any such alliance depends on our protection, which depends in turn depends on Protectors and warships. That will take years. And *where* to hold the Conference? Choosing one economically or strategically important world may well offend another.”

Kal’Entor caught my eye. He just stood there, looking glum. So did the instructors. They didn’t know the score in the Senate’s game. And even Dar’yul didn’t know what was next in the High Council’s game. While he was here on Erin’lah, Koro’lat and his allies had drafted an order for the candidates to report to the Shrine for initiation. That would have to do until the Hall was built, but it was a victory for Aphro’dite, and the newsnets played it as such.

Chapter Fourteen

It was pretty lonely at the Academy after the candidates left. Even Dar’yul had gone, explaining that he wanted to be with the rest of the High Council for the first round of initiations. And would there be changes in the training program for Protectors, once they had been enhanced?

Beyond that, there were the issues of how summoning young Prima-1 women on Velor to try out for Protectors, and how the attempted recall of Companions to join their ranks would be handled. The recall would have to be communicated by the Scalantrans,

and both the Senate and the High Council would have to be involved in working things out with them. And how would it be determined where new Protectors would be assigned? Would Enhanced Companions be expected to return whence they came?

I knew where *I* would be going, as the only case of the latter, and I wasn't about to accept any orders to the contrary – from the High Council, or even Aphro'dite herself. I made that clear to Alexios – that I wanted to leave for Tazzi as soon as possible, with or without him.

“*With?*” he asked hopefully.

“It's an if.”

“And if you were to accept that 'if'?”

“We could take *your* ship from Erin'dor. I know something about navigation, from flying a wormhole from Tazzi to Selene.”

I explained how that had come about, but Alexios was skeptical.

“Do you really know *enough?* For *any* wormhole?”

He had a good point, I realized, but also a more telling one.

“Anyway, it's not *my* ship, and I don't know how to operate it. **She** was the one who flew it here, and she said she'd be back for it. Something to do with technology they'd need on Velor for the program. None of my business.”

That was that. Alone or in company, there was no option but the Scalantrans for getting where I wanted to go.

“We'd better touch base with Opara,” I said.

“Who?”

“She's the Scalantran Factor General here, officially in charge of trade relations. But unofficially, she's involved in diplomatic relations with Velor – which haven't gone at all smoothly in recent years. Have you heard about the *Galactic Roamer?*”

“The ship on which Ju'lette escaped after the authorities here refused to credit her warnings about the Aureans? Aphro'dite told me that story, said the failure of Senate and High Council to deal with the threat had prompted her own decision to intervene herself – although though I find it hard to believe she hadn't had something of the sort in mind for quite a while before that.”

“The *Galactic Roamer* was barred from any further trade with Velor, and the ship Ju’lette had arrived on, the *Far Wanderer*, was interned. It was finally cleared to leave just recently; the ship I came on, the *Boundless Opportunity*, encountered them at one of our stops, spreading their story. There’s a lot more to it, but—”

“But... can Opara help you reach Tazzi?”

“That all depends. But the safety and possibly even the survival of her people there depends on me.”

And I told her about the detention of the Factor General in New London, along with her staff and mate group.

“There was nothing I could do to help them; it was all I could manage to escape myself. I brought word to the Factor General at Novy Kyiv on Selene, and he has been spreading it from there. But all the Scalantrans can do is put an interdict on trade with Tazzi, and that isn’t likely to faze the dictator there.”

I told him about Gazrall, but left out Mal’kar...

* * *

If it was lonely at the Academy, it was just the opposite at the spaceport, what with a record number of Scalantran ships and their crews. That would normally have meant a lot of hustle and bustle. But with the future of trade up in the air, there was nothing of the sort.

The *Boundless Opportunity* had opted to remain here, but ships that had arrived here since then didn’t have any choice. Among them were the *Margin of Profit*, which I might have taken if I’d had any more time to make my escape; the *Hopeful Trader*, which had taken me to Tazzi but wouldn’t be stopping there any more; and even the *Bountiful Voyager* – which still traded with Andros and other worlds beyond it that had become the homes of the first Companions.

There would no longer be any Companions, and no way to pay for trade goods – mostly technological, but also exotic foods and art works – except on credit. And could Velor back that credit with anything but its word? Without trade negotiations, there was nothing for the Scalantrans here to *do*. That included Opara; there was no trouble getting to see her.

I began to introduce Alexios, but she interrupted me.

"We watch the newsnets. You've both made names for yourselves."

"Do you know anything *besides* that? Anything *official*?"

"Nothing," she said. "We're still waiting to hear from the Senate. What about you two? Do you know anything that hasn't been on the newsnets?"

"He wants to come with me."

Opara gave Alexios a long look, a *very* long look. Her response startled me.

"He could pass for an Aurean, on Tazzi. Even as a messenger for the Empire."

I winced at that, reminded of Mal'kar.

"He doesn't speak Aurean."

"We could deepteach him. And he could pretend to be bringing word that the Grand Factor and the Grand Assembly might be willing to do business with the Empire – now that it appears Velor will no longer be doing business with us."

Of course, I realized. This was about rescuing her people on Tazzi. Scalantrans would never abandon their own.

"We'll have to figure out how to get him there," I ventured.

"I could fly like I did—"

"Aureans can't fly," I had to remind him. He looked abashed for the first time since we'd met.

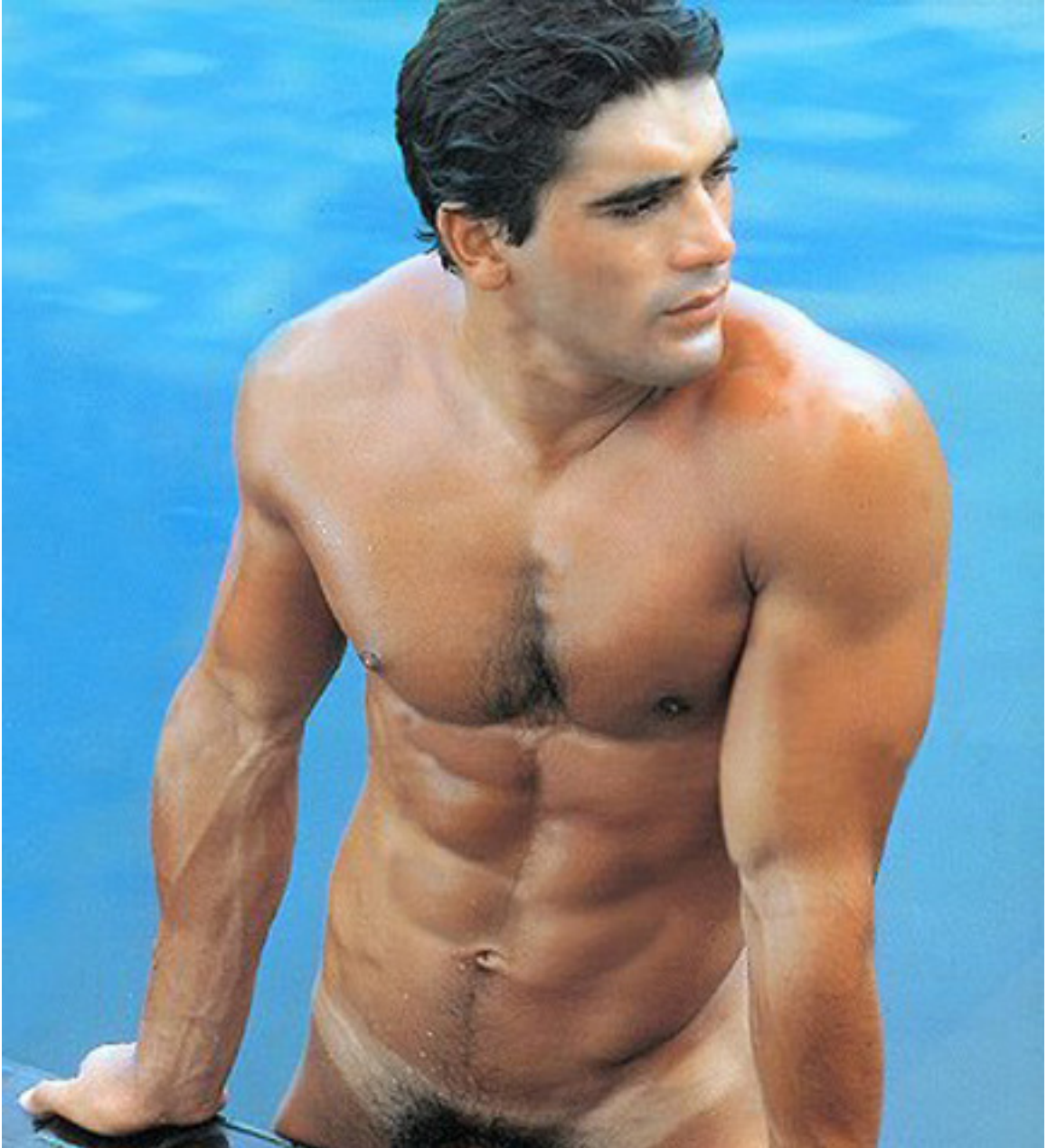
"Could we steal one of their ships?" Opara wondered. "I could ask around."

That would take a while. To while away the time, we wandered around to see the sights, such as they were. The trading fairground had plenty of tents and booths, but they were nearly empty – just remnants of unsold food and drink items. Some Scalantrans were making use of them, and I could tell one had a baby, from the swelling of her tlax.

I took Alexios with me on a visit to the *Hopeful Trader*, for old time's sake. Too old for the newer crewmen, but Travel Captain Pompana and historian Diuna remembered me – although I hadn't had much to do with them, as opposed to Trade Captain Avlasara. She was now retired, and teaching on a Youthworld.

Not that it mattered. What did was our upcoming mission to Tazzi; it was safe to share our plans with them, and Diuna was intrigued with the idea of Alexios going as an Aurean. "You might want to check out Freiwelt," she said. "I've heard tell they have an Aurean starship captured during the Revolution."

“A lucky break, if true. I suggested she run it by Opara, but that would take a while. So... back to walking, until we came across the swimming pool just past the fairground. It looked inviting. Alexis stripped and invited himself into, stroking out and back.



When he returned, the first thing I noticed was between his legs. It was growing, and I was looking, He turned his head a moment to see if anyone else was looking. Then he looked back at me, with love in his eyes as well as lust down below.

And right then, I knew that I loved this man, a man who would help me redeem a world I loved...

"Come fly with me," he said, knowing that I couldn't, even on farside Erin'lah.

Alexios leapt out of the pool, grabbed his clothes, grabbed me, and soared into the air. We flew for many oras, far past any sign of habitation, to a verdant meadow.

Only now did I have a chance to strip, and it was too much for him – he really did explode. His cum splattered on my breasts and belly, cum that would have been lethal to a Terran, but that was only a turn-on for me. But what had me dripping, even squirting, was the sight of his cock – which was as rampant as ever.

I lay back on the grass and spread my legs, crying "Fuck me! Fuck me now!"

Alexios obeyed, and the moment he entered me, he exploded again. I could feel him explode, feel his cum as he shot, feel his hardness pressing against all my pleasure points. My inner muscles squeezed his cock with all their might; even Vendorian steel would be crushed, but never his manhood. It was a battering ram that could destroy any obstacle, but never my womanhood. He fucked me again and again and...

Until he invited me to fuck *him*. It was time for *him* to lie back and take it – and he took it like a man as I impaled myself on him and rode him like a woman possessed. No, a woman *possessing*; he belonged to me as much as I belonged to him – we belonged to each other. I pounded him into the ground, and he loved it as much as when he had pounded me. He looked me in the eyes as I rode him, and assailed my breasts – mauling them with all his might, taking my joy as his own, making it *our* joy as we came together. I cried out his name, as he cried out mine – and we declared our love in Velorian.

"Kai tamoor'sk!" I screamed

"Kai tamoor'sk!" he screamed.

I realized only later that I hadn't thought once of Mal'kar. I was free of him at last.

* * *

Opara told us the next day that she'd confirmed the report about the Aurean ship, from "another source." She still hadn't heard from the Senate about any policy directives, but agreed that time was of the essence.

"We can't afford to wait," she said, and called ahead to Travel Captain Manesha.

We left the office, in haste to board the *Boundless Opportunity*.

Part Three: Second Homecoming

Chapter Fifteen

It turned out that we had a fellow passenger: Ivry Rakhmenty, the lottery boy from Selene, who hadn't seen any point remaining at the Academy if the erstwhile candidates were going to be summoned to Velor for enhancement.

He was surprised to see us, and a tad embarrassed – he had known who we were, of course, but hadn't known until now that we had become a *couple*. He still didn't have any idea about our agenda – and we weren't about to enlighten him.

"We're headed for Tazzi," I said. "That's where I came from, you know, and that's where I'll serve as Protector. It will be like coming home for me, and finding a new home for my... partner.

"But we don't stop there."

"We'll make a connection."

I figured he must have presumed that would be at Selene, where we could wait for the *Hopeful Trader* – he couldn't have known that ship was avoiding Tazzi out of concern for its own safety after the internment of the Scalantans there.

"Not a straight path," Ivry said, with a wink – confirming my own presumption, and referencing the script Alexios had followed in announcing the coming of Aphro'dite. He'd taken pride in knowing where in the Old Believers' Holy Book about making a straight path had come.

"Indeed," I said. "But we know our path, regardless.

As it happened, Freiwelt, our immediate destination, was on one of the other trade routes intersecting at Selene, and served by the *Merchanter's Luck*. But the chances of catching that ship in time for us to do any good were slim to none.

The *Boundless Opportunity* would be stopping at Selene only because it was a hub planet, with links to routes served by other ships. It was skipping its usual calls to non-hub worlds on the route, officially for want of trade goods (and not just Companions). But unofficially, it was carrying the news from Velor, to share with other ships calling at Selene and hub worlds beyond on its own route. Fellow Scalantans would spread the word about the new era dawning, even if many of the details had yet to be worked out...

Eventually it would reach the Grand Factor, and a Grand Assembly would have to be called. That would take years, but by then Velor would – hopefully – have more to say about its plans. The Enlightenment-to-be and the Scalantrans might thus be in a better position to work together.

But that was all speculative. We were dealing with immediate reality – the reality of a mission to save the Scalantrans on Tazzi that we dared not reveal. And yet we could not fully conceal the fact that we had some hidden agenda. For our ship, on its present journey, there would be one unscheduled stop before Selene...

We were headed straight for Freiwelt, or as straight as the wormholes would allow. Travel captain Manesha appreciated the urgency of our mission, having been briefed by Opara, and had wasted no time lifting off.

“We’re going to be long gone, in case the Velorians try to forestall us!” he’d said, as soon as we’d gotten settled.

“No offense intended,” he’d added, looking at me.”

Then he’d turned to Alexios, knowing that he would soon to be deeptaught in how to operate an Aurean ship – as well as in speaking Aurean like a native, an obvious must for his imposture.

“So now you’re our secret agent... but I’ll keep that between us.”

As indeed he would. But the *Boundless Opportunity* was prepared for what it was about to do to train him as an agent. Which meant as an Aurean pilot.

Scalantrans had long shared whatever knowledge came their way by any means, and might one day become useful, even if they had no idea when or how. Ship historian Kinyam hadn’t expected to ever have need to impart knowledge of control systems for Aurean ships, picked up somehow, sometime, somewhere by fellow Scalantrans – but now that he did, he knew what to do...

Only, how could we keep Ivry from possibly compromising our mission after our unexplained disappearance? What was he going to tell people at Selene when he arrived without us? He didn’t know anything about our plans, save for our destination; but he knew about Aphro’dite and the Protector program, and when we took our leave at Freiwelt – nobody was going to mention its name in his hearing – he was bound to wonder, and wonder aloud...

One thing he couldn't even guess about, much less wonder about, was the false bulletin Alexios would be taking with him – the one about the Grand Factor considering the idea of an alliance with the Empire, in face of the threat of the GAR rendering the Velorians incapable of defending Scalantran ships or trading stations. It had to be really good – good enough to fool not only the Aureans on Tazzi, but the interned Vaharem and his mate group. It had to offer a plausible paper trail.

Kinyam, with the assistance of Trade Captain Farishan, put her mind and heart into it. It had to refer to Tithzarem's original report from Gebron, which had been picked up by Bensalem. But it couldn't seem to come from Bensalem; somebody might check up and discover that Bensalem had had a change of heart. It had to come from somebody far distant, on a trade route unfamiliar in this sector. And I was the one who suggested a survivor of the trade mission on Tanzrobi, the world conquered by the Empire years ago as reported by Companion Ju'lette in her ill-fated effort to persuade Velor to take action against the Aureans. It still made me wince to remember how the now-disgraced Jes'kor had run interference with the High Council, buying in an Aurean prisoner's story that the conquest of that planet, with only the light GAR, had been a rogue operation.

If any Scalantrans remained there, they'd have reason to reach accommodation with the Aureans – and to propose a more general accommodation if they believed that the heavy GAR ended any hope of liberation by the Velorians. Not that Velor had ever taken any interest in Tanzrobi; that planet had never had a Companion nor seemingly a need for one for defense – the natives were protos, the most powerful of were comparable to Velorians, and yet vulnerable to GARs.

Farishan came up with a name, Molnaro, for a surviving resident factor allowed to leave the planet and to tell his story to his fellow Scalantrans – and appeal to the Grand Factor for a hearing. We could only hope it would be welcomed by the Aureans and seen as authentic by the Scalantrans on Tazzi...

At least we'd get a warm welcome on Freiwelt; the liberated planet, formerly known as Himmelsreich, even had its own Companion. There wouldn't be any problem getting them to let us have that abandoned Aurean ship, or of anybody questioning our plans, let alone compromising them. The only potential leak about *that* was **here**, in the person of Ivory. There was nothing we could do to ensure his silence.

One thing we *could* do was to keep word from getting out about Alexios' deepteach sessions.

I accompanied him to those sessions, and for all anyone but the senior command officers and Kinyam himself could know we were merely bringing the historian up to date about what had gone down on Velor – and what the future might hold. Having undergone language deepteaching myself, I could explain to Alexios that it wasn't magic – it took time, and practice, for the vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation to become second nature rather than mere rote memorization. I myself took a quick course in Doych, the main language on Freiwelt – it should be enough to make me understood, even though I wouldn't be really fluent.

When it came to Alexios piloting an Aurean ship, we didn't have an enemy vessel to practice on; he had to make do with video simulations based on data from one, and visits to the bridge to get the feel of what it was like to be at the helm. He also had to memorize his route to Tazzi from Freiwelt; that too took time. It would take time for us to transit the wormholes to Freiwelt in any case. What didn't take time was studying a map of Freiwelt, showing the capital on the east coast of the main continent. It was called Gemeindezentrum – Communal Center. That's where we'd find the right people to deal with, people who could speak Scalantran in case my Doych wasn't up to the task. And we'd also get a chance to meet Aman'thula and brief her on the news from Velor.

Meanwhile, we kept a low profile – as low as we could, given who we were. The crew respected that, knowing that we were coming to the aid of their brethren on Tazzi even if they hadn't been briefed on all the details. They expected that commitment from me, but assumed that Alexios was only along for the ride, and that our relationship was just about riding each other – which we did a lot of, but more quietly than we had in the meadow.

* * *

"I owe them," he had told me just before we left Erin'lah. Meaning the Scalantrans who had spirited him away from Ishtar after the death of Zakiti, allowing him to travel with them thereafter – and keeping quiet about his crime; he called it a crime.

"But that's not why I'm here," he'd said.

"I *know*."

“No, it’s not that. Not *just* that. I want to do my part, a part only *I* can do. Because only I can pass as an Aurean. But it took Opara to make me think of that, to *realize* how I could help save her people; and all the rest followed, even our flight to the meadow. I finally felt worthy of your love, free to worship you, body and soul.”

Worship...

I too had finally felt free, to give myself utterly to a man who had chosen to give of himself for the good of others he didn’t even know – I couldn’t wait to get settled onboard, where we could worship each other again and again, to our bodies’ and hearts’ content. It would be like going to Heaven together. Not like the otherworldly Heaven of the Old Believers, but one we could make for ourselves – anywhere, any time.

And if we couldn’t turn Tazzi into an earthly Heaven, we could give people there a chance to make it a good place for them to live – and pursue whatever happiness was in their own natures.

* * *

I realized that we couldn’t avoid Ivry. In any case, shunning him would surely be counterproductive. And if he were jealous; given that he had no outlet for sex on the ship, he showed no sign of it the next time I encountered him, after my final round of Doych deepreach. He was looking forward to coming home to Selene.

“Just because I’ve been a lottery boy, the girls will be crazy to put out for me,” he told us. “It’ll be all I can do to keep up... well, more than I can keep up with.”

“Do you have anything else in mind?” I wondered.

“Oh, there’s a company I want to work for, Veliky Vagon Tvorets,” he said. “I used to read about them in *Teknika Molodezhi*. They’re the leaders in custom technologies for the whole sector. And some of their engineers get to travel to other worlds. I’d love to.”

“I consulted some of their engineers about the GAR on the way to Velor. They were very helpful.”

That was an understatement, to say the very least.

“Could you recommend me as aspirant?”

I could ask Rurik, or even Vladimir – if we were headed for Selene. But since we weren’t...

“I rather doubt they’d listen to me,” I said. “They’re strictly business in contacts with Scalantrans, or even Velorians. And any change in the status of the Empire would be bad for business.”

Ivry couldn’t hide his disappointment. But he hung around, and began telling us about his childhood on Selene, as son of a spaceport logistics manager, whose company offloaded and onloaded trade goods for the Scalantrans. He got to see a lot of them coming and going, and wondered where they were coming from or going to. He’d even familiarized himself with the routes of all the ships that called at Selene.

“Of course, I wanted to actually see those other worlds.”

And seen them he had, on the way to Velor. He knew the route – out and back. I couldn’t help but worry about that. Was he keeping track of our wormhole transits? The count wouldn’t be the same as for the Eslor-Irukan-Trpcic-Selene route.

“But I’d never have gotten to see *any* of them, if it hadn’t been for the lottery,” Ivry continued. “Father wouldn’t hear of it – afraid I might be killed – but I was of age, and he couldn’t stop me from signing up. I’d grown up knowing about Reyana and Espara and – well, you know...”

Those were the Companions indentured to business magnates on his homeworld. They were rarely seen in public, but everyone knew what they were there for. Occasional pictures made it to the newsnets, and Ivry was but one of countless millions to fantasize about Velorian sex goddesses who were forever out of reach – except for the rare young man who won the lottery.

“Yes, I know,” I told him.

“You had a lottery boy, of course.”

“From a planet called Shampanya that you probably never heard of. It’s in the opposite direction from Velor. He was so sweet, and I took care to be gentle with him – but he knew he didn’t have to be gentle with me, and I loved it when he let loose. It was just the kind of education that I needed as a Companion.”

I wasn’t going to get into how hard it had been to find a man on Tazzi who could let loose with a really great fuck, after my frustration with Gazrall. I wasn’t going to get into Gazrall at all. Fortunately, Ivry showed no interest in my indenture – he had to know

I had broken it for cause, even if he didn't know the details. Instead he asked about Tazzi itself.

"An Angliski world, is it not?"

"Indeed, although it has attracted some immigrants from elsewhere since it was Seeded."

I recounted some of its colorful history and customs – while leaving out anything about the current situation there. Still, I thought he might have guessed something, and a moment later I was proved right.

"The Aureans have taken over Tazzi, haven't they? Who else would have a GAR? And now you and Alexios are going to have to deal with them."

Skietra!

He was simply putting two and two together, but *knowing* that he knew changed everything. I knew what I had to do now, but I had to clear it with Alexios.

* * *

"We still can't tell him the *real* story," Alexios said. "But we can tell him a story he'll *believe* – and keep quiet about *because* he believes it."

"My thoughts exactly," I said. "But then, great minds think alike."

And now we put our minds to work on our cover story. It didn't take that long, all things considered. Ivry was surprised when I caught up with him, and invited him to our private quarters. He was positively shocked when he learned what it was all about. I got right to the point, and didn't mince any words.

"There's something we need to tell you, but you can't tell anyone else. It has to do with the Aureans on Tazzi. We know where they came from. They have a forward base on another planet in this sector – one we'd never even heard of, but which I found out about by pure chance before I left for Velor. I shared that secret only with the Senate at the time of my dealings with them, and before the arrival of Aphro'dite and Alexios and all that followed. But now I've shared it with the senior officers of the *Boundless Opportunity*, and that's where they're taking us. That's where we get off."

"But... *Selene*..."

"The ship will return to its route after it lets us off. You'll see home again. And the Factor General there will arrange for another ship to pick us up after we've... finished our

work. The Scalantrans are good at keeping secrets, and we trust that you too can be – in this matter.”

“But how?”

“Do you really have to ask? It was only after my Enhancement that I thought of doing this. If it hadn’t been for that, the Aureans could have made short work of me. But now Alexios and I can make short work of *them*.”

“I mean, how did you find out about the *route*?”

“There was a transport ship of theirs that crashed on Tazzi, bringing the first GAR. The pilot didn’t survive, but the ship’s memory did. And I recorded the route on a chip and brought that with me to Velor, along with the GAR chips.”

Alexios, bless him, had anticipated that question. Thanks to him, I was ready for it, taking a kernel of truth about that Aurean ship and turning it into a convincing lie. I shot a glance at him, and he smiled. Then he turned his attention to Ivry.

“Like Vespyr, I’m counting on you to keep this to yourself,” he said. “But maybe not for always. After we complete our mission... well, we’ll see.”

We could already see the pride on Ivry’s face, his sense of importance at having been trusted with our story. He’d arrive home as a happy man, even happier that he’d expected as a lottery boy.

But how would he feel when and if he learned he’d been had?

“It’s not as if we fucked him over,” Alexios opined after Ivry left. “And we really will get to take care of the Aureans on Tazzi, once we get the Scalantrans released.”

“Speaking of fucking...”

We fucked up a storm over the few remaining ship days before transiting the final wormhole to Freiwelt’s system. *The Boundless Opportunity* wouldn’t be coming anywhere near the planet itself; we’d be let off at the outskirts, and fly the rest of the way in. Not so long ago, I could never have imagined having a flying partner, other than a fellow Velorian...

The ship could make up for lost time by turning about and jumping back through the same wormhole. It would arrive at Selene just about on schedule. That would make Ivry happy, and we wanted him happy

As for ourselves...

Chapter Sixteen

We didn't have any trouble finding Gemeindezentrum. It was an odd city, with an ornate palace complex that must have served the rulers of Himmelsreich in their day. Elaborate stonework, stained glass windows, brightly-colored spires – it was a monument to aristocratic power and pride.

Yet it was surrounded by squarish utilitarian buildings of plain concrete – all the same size, and following the same general design. We couldn't tell what any of them were *for* – living quarters, government offices, business places? All three? What we could tell was that we had gotten the attention of the people in the streets, and along the shore.

It was like my reception in Novy Kyiv – only I had a flying *man* with me. That was something the citizens of the capital – their dress was as plain and utilitarian as their buildings – would never have seen before, however much they knew of Velorians. They were keeping their distance, not knowing what to make of us.

But some must have called the authorities, for Aman'thula shortly appeared in the sky and descended into the street to meet us. I wasted no time in greeting her in Velorian, and then got down to business.

"My name is Vespyr Tal'esta, and I bring word from the Senate and High Council," I began.

It was important to invoke traditional Velorian authority, rather than spring the whole business of Aphro'dite and the Protectors and all the rest on her. And I had to lay out the background: the threat of the GAR, and how I had discovered it on Tazzi and brought warning to Velor.

Only then did I reveal that the key to our people's very survival had come from an unexpected quarter – a Galen whose mandate was from Skietra herself. Only then did I introduce Alexios as her herald, and now my partner. And only then did I lay out the details of Enhancement, the creation of Protectors, and the longer-range effort to create an interstellar alliance against the Aureans.

"But right now, we have our own mission, to come to the aid of Scalantrans held prisoner on Tazzi by the Aureans. And we need your help."

Aman'thula had to collect her thoughts for a few moments before she responded.

“This is a lot to take in,” she said. “Will they assign a Protector here? Will they want me to return to Velor for this ‘Enhancement?’ I cannot and must not in good conscience do so, leaving Freiwelt unprotected. As for your own mission, what do you imagine I can possibly do to help you?”

“We have heard that you have an Aurean starship here, abandoned during the Revolution. If so, we hope to use it for a stealth operation against the enemy on Tazzi. My partner would pose as an Aurean, he has already undergone deepteach in the Aurean language and the operating system for the ship.”

“Your hope may be in vain,” the Companion advised us in a regretful tone. “That ship is no longer operational. Some key components of the drive controls were removed after it was turned into a historic site – we didn’t want anyone accidentally starting it up. I don’t know what ever became of them, or who might be able to find them today. But Der Weisheitsmann might know. She was one of the leaders of the Revolution, and knows more about that time than anyone else.”

That woman’s title meant “the Wisdom;” she had long since given up her original name. She owed her position to the acclaim she had attracted for her role in freeing the commoners – an acclaim renewed a number of times since by old and new commoner in world brain polls. She was now regarded as the fount of all wisdom, whose precepts had become the very foundation of the state. Even Aman’thula seemed impressed.

“Women here receive the same education as men, do the same kinds of work, and even serve in the planet’s military,” she said. “They are never burdened with motherhood, for their children are conceived at the behest of and raised by their community. Women are all beautiful, thanks to energetic exercise – and thus fit companions for the men of this world.”

It sounded rather pretentious to me, but I didn’t want to get into an argument with her. But I did wonder about the need for a military.

“To guard against a return of the Garzarollis and their allies,” she explained. “And to oversee the feindesvolkes – enemies of the people.”

Those were descendants of the a few nobles and a greater number of their loyal servants who had failed to escape with the Garzarollis. They had been allowed to breed to supply laborers for the mines and other dangerous occupations.

I cringed inwardly at that but, again, I didn't want to get into an argument. I let her lead us the office of the Wisdom in one of those squarish buildings. I'd expected the seat of government to be in the former palace, but Aman'thula said that was being used for as a center of learning.

The Wisdom turned out to be gray-haired, apparently in her 70s, but surprisingly fit. She dressed modestly, of course – revealing attire seemed to be against custom for young people of both sexes. But her outfit was plain, almost as plain as those for ordinary citizens. She had a considerable staff in her own office, and administrators and their staffs for a number of departments occupied the rest of the building.

We explained our purpose, and she agreed to come with us to the starship site, in pursuit of leads to the missing components. But she didn't want us to carry her; she was nervous about that – perhaps because of her age. We didn't press the point. Instead, the three of us boarded a government flitter – the pilot didn't need directions; the historic site was evidently well known, and it wasn't that far off.

Along the way, the Wisdom talked up a storm about the progress Freiwelt had made since the Revolution. We were passing over a stretch of farmland, where grain was raised in neatly rectangular fields bordered by neatly straight rows of fruit trees – but the rows had regularly spaced gaps for passage of tractors and other equipment. She waxed rhapsodic about the lives of the farm workers, who lived in communal housing nearby.

"Our people go into the fields with banners flying, trumpets and other instruments sounding, with whatever they need to harrow, plow, sow, weed or harvest. Every task can be accomplished in a few hours. We make the most of our resources, and our people; if you can remain with us just a few weeks, you can witness the next harvest."

"Alas, we cannot afford to delay our mission," I said.

Truly alas, when we reached the historic site, we found that there would be a delay. The kurator, a man named Rupert, said the missing parts weren't being kept there.

"I think Margarete, the first kurator, might have taken them as souvenirs when she retired," Rupert. She may still be living in Kaltenbach."

That was a smaller city, once the domain of a smaller lord, with a smaller palace. We had to re-board the flitter, and head there, and trust to luck. It was a lot further off from the capital area, and it took several hours to reach there.

At first we seemed to be out of luck. Margarete had died the year before, without leaving any personal effects – personal effects were frowned on, in any case. We asked around at community hall, and finally learned that she'd given the starship components to the local library – they didn't look impressive, and hadn't made much of an impression on the locals, but there they were.

We needed to get them back, and that took some persuading by the Wisdom. But persuade them she did, and took custody of same. We didn't want to risk any damage to them, so we took off for the starship, with her following in the flitter. We'd have to figure out how to re-install them, a difficulty we hadn't anticipated, but she'd have some technical experts from the university meet us at the site and lend their help.

Only there was something else we hadn't anticipated: hardly had we landed next to the ship we planned to steal than another appeared in the heavens. We heard about it from the Wisdom, but she wasn't wise to what was happening.

"Has your ship returned for you already?" she asked.

"It *can't* be *our* ship!" I shouted. "It's got to be the enemy. Sound the alarm, and evacuate the capital. That's where they're bound to be heading."

"Aman'thula can deal with—"

"She'll be one of the targets. They have a new weapon, designed to kill Velorians, called a GAR. We told her about it. Kill her, and terrorize the rest – that's going to be their game. Warn her and warn the people. It could already be too late. **Out!**"

"Wait for me at the point of land over there," I told Alexios, pointing to a spot on the seacoast where we could make a stand without endangering anyone else. "They won't know about you, and I don't want you to give yourself away by flying with me."

I suddenly remembered something else essential: "***Hide the Molnaro thing!***"

That last thing off my mind, I tore into the air, headed for Gemeindezentrum, fairly praying to be in time. As I neared the city, the Aurean ship loomed over the palace – a scout ship rather than a battle cruiser, but deadly enough even if it wasn't out to obliterate the capital; perhaps they meant to save it for the return of the ruling class.

People were already fleeing into the countryside; the Wisdom had gotten the word out. But they couldn't possibly all make it out – it was up to me now. They must be waiting for Aman'thula to rise to the occasion, never knowing that it would be her last. And so...

I rose in her stead, approaching the ship defiantly, taunting the Aureans as she would have. They turned toward me, and fired – but I darted away; I couldn't afford the erotic distraction, at least not yet. After several moments of sky dancing, I turned south and headed for where I'd left Alexios. To confuse and aggravate the Aureans, I dove into the sea, as if trying to lose them, then reappeared. Boiling water and dead fish confirmed that they were using an energy weapon, but it should have been a lot worse with a GAR. Back over land, they fired again – and again the effect too was conventional.

It was hard to believe they'd have come this far without their ultimate weapon. But at least I'd diverted them from the capital. I decided to continue without any further aerial acrobatics, and came in for a landing a short distance from Alexios, who strolled up beside me. The Aureans' craft set down a stone's throw away from us – a Terran stone's throw, that is. Two of them got out, and one of them was carrying... the GAR. The other had what appeared to be a small vid recorder.

So they had it, but hadn't managed to install it as a replacement for the standard energy weapon. Had they been in too much of a hurry, or did they just lack the expertise? Where had they come from, and why *now*?

Whoever these two were, they must have thought they knew what we were facing – and that we didn't. They were speaking to each other in their own language, and that revealed they had an agenda beyond just killing us – they couldn't know that Alexios could overhear, and understand.

"The man with the GAR is saying he has the revised script down pat, and the other is telling him to get on with it. That other man turned to us and spoke in broken Velorian.

"Tought you get way? No can do. We too quick. You die quick, you and native – become stuff of vidtain."

"We could still get away, faster than you could follow," I said. "But *you* can't."

Neither of them responded, if indeed they could make out that I was calling their bluff. Instead, they began speaking in *Scalantran*.

"Just like all Velorian scum, giving it away to frails," the Aurean with the GAR sneered to the other – who had a vid recorder. "They don't know it, but they're about to get what's coming to them."

"Fire when ready!" the other responded, as if the first needed a cue.

So it was for all for a propaganda stunt! Well, we could play the same game.

“Give it your best shot!” I taunted them, also in Scalantran. It may have confused them, but only for a moment. We stood our ground together, hands on hips.

“First your boy toy, then you,” the first Aurean shouted.

The invisible beam struck Alexios; his clothes vanished, revealing him in all his naked majesty – including his cock, which sprang to attention. He didn’t make a move, standing there defiantly – but his cock exploded, sending gobs of cum spurting upwards,. and he cried out in pleasure

The marksman, who had expected a mere frail to be instantly obliterated, stared in disbelief.

“I’ll have what he’s having,” I moaned in Scalantran.

In a panic, he shot at me and kept the beam on. It was like at the stadium, only this time I wasn’t embarrassed. I was unabashedly ecstatic, and screamed with joy as I came. He could see my breasts swelling, their aroused nipples pointing at him. He could see my juices dripping. I began playing with myself, my right hand between my legs.

“Watch me come!” I taunted him – and did.

The marksman speechless.

Then I glanced at Alexios, beckoned to him to join the performance.

“*Shoot, shoot!*” he taunted the Aureans – in their own language, but translating in a low voice just for me. And followed with “*Watch us fuck!*”

And that was when they really lost it – and began firing again. They knew it was futile, but it was all they knew to do. I felt that wondrous warmth as I impaled myself on Alexios and rode him to one climax after another, as he gazed in to my eyes and fondled my breasts. There was nothing, nothing in the universe, more glorious than the feeling of being stretched and filled to the brim with his manhood – except the transcendent feeling of his manhood erupting inside me. “Shoot, shoot!” I’d cry in Velorian, and he was eager to comply – again and again. In the back of my mind, I knew that the Aureans too could hear and understand, but in the front of my mind it was all about Alexios. Until I suddenly no longer felt the warmth of the GAR...

I broke off our lovemaking, and turned to look. Alexios was startled at first, but he saw where I was looking and turned to look himself.

The Aureans were no longer shooting. They were no longer doing anything but whimper. It was a pathetic sight. For a moment, I felt the thrill of triumph, but then I began to feel something else – pity, and even regret, however slight. We'd been playing a game with the enemy; but then our entire mission was a game, an elaborate deception – and deception was essential if we were to save the Scalantrans on Tazzi.

And Freiwelt itself was still threatened. If, as seemed likely, the Aureans returned in force, our only weapon against them would be the GAR. Putting pity and regret aside, I wrestled it away from the marksman, who said nothing but kept whimpering. I retrieved the vid recorder from his confederate, who didn't resist and all. Then I got in touch with the Wisdom to give her the All Clear, and to send Aman'thula for the GAR – explaining how she might have use for it.

We'd already done the right thing trusting the Wisdom with the drive control parts, warning her in time about the Aurean attack, and even standing with our backs to the sea when we confronted our would-be killers, avoiding any collateral damage to persons or property. Yet that first bit had been a matter of luck, or at least excess caution at the time. As night fell on Freiwelt, we could only hope our luck held out.



Chapter Seventeen

It was more like strange luck.

The technicians from the capital were able to install the drive controls, but the ship at the historic site still wouldn't work. They figured the Aureans might have some secret activation code, or perhaps the controls or the drive itself had deteriorated over the years since the Revolution – it wasn't as if they'd had any regular maintenance.

On the other hand, we now had the scout ship.

I'd assumed it had come from Tazzi, and would be recognized there if Alexios flew it in. But its log, which he could easily access and read, showed that had last departed from Ulvsby, a far distant Aurean satrapy that seemed to have no connection to Gazrall or his minders. Perhaps they had sent for reinforcements to deal with Freiwelt, although why they had to look so far, and why they seemed to have a sudden interest in reclaiming the planet remained a mystery.

Forewarned is forearmed. That proved the case for Aman'thula before long, when the Aurean warship we'd been expecting burst from the wormhole – only to explode without getting anywhere near Freiwelt after she intercepted and then zapped it with our captured GAR. I'd told her about our experience back home with the *Admiral Kirkland* – yes, I even said “back home.” She appreciated that, having fallen in love with her own adopted planet.

Too much in love, I was thinking. A shipload of Aureans had died at her hands, and I could easily live with that – it was an act of war, like so many engagements across the Galaxy and through history, even if it might be unprecedented for lone Velorian to take on an Aurean ship. But I was squeamish about executing the two who had fallen into our hands. To me, that would be murder in cold blood. I wasn't expecting her to make an issue of it, given that we'd supplied the weapon she'd used. And yet she did.

It came to a head when I called her at her quarters, as spartan as the Wisdom's – Alexios was keeping an eye on the prisoners back at their ship; we'd been taking turns at that.

“We need to decide what to do about our two prisoners, now that the threat from the Empire has been averted. We have them under interrogation, and they might be more inclined to cooperate if—”

"They're too dangerous," she interrupted. "We can't just send them the mines. How can we control them? They could lead a rebellion among the feindesvolkes."

She had a point, but I had a counter-point.

"They're too traumatized to be a threat now, and if we were to keep them shackled in gold," I suggested.

"The Wisdom and her people don't approve of gold. It's a legacy of—"

"What about the men and women who win your—"

"A necessary exception. But you have been misinformed. They earn their time with me through public service and the recommendations of their comrades."

I sensed it was time to back off; this was getting too personal. *And* too political – it was the Wisdom, she was reminding me, who had the final say. And yet she seemed to feel...

"Thanks for setting me straight," I said. "But in the matter of the prisoners, it is my belief that they can become valuable sources of intelligence. Alexios is working on that even as we speak. But we could really use an incentive to—"

"I'll take it up with the Wisdom. But this would be just an accommodation, another matter of necessity. And it had better be worth it."

If she was still cross with me, I'd have to live with that – until Alexios and I were able to get something out of those prisoners. Only, so far, we hadn't even managed to get their names. All we knew for sure was that they were mere Betas rather than Primes.

It was an exercise in frustration, all the more because taking turns guarding them had put our love life on hold. Talk about irony! It would be easier when Aman'thula – well, the Wisdom – delivered on the gold. It shouldn't matter if the testy Companion's second thoughts yielded to third thoughts, or returned to her first. It all depended on the Wisdom, and she knew that her world *owed* us.

As for Aman'thula herself, I had never encountered a Velorian as unpredictable and even seemingly alien. Yet she and I had something in common: we had each been seduced by an *idea*, even though my seduction was at the hands of a man espousing that idea. I doubt that Aman'thula had anyone like Mal'kar in her life. She must be enjoying her romps with those public-spirited citizens; and playing the field was nothing new for our kind. But had she ever experienced any sexual *passion*?

Not that her private life was any of my business. My business was with my partner, with the Scalantrans, with our mission. And when I returned to Alexios, he had progress to report, but nothing of real use to us.

“Their names are Dundor and Skeklor, and they confirm that they were dispatched from Ulvsby with the battle cruiser,” he said. “But they claim their part was on a need-to-know basis and that they had only directions to the capital, and orders to hover there – to draw out the Companion and trigger panic. By the time the mother ship appeared, the planet would be ready to surrender.”

“It doesn’t add up,” I pointed out. “Why hadn’t the GAR been installed on their ship? Were they going to somehow lure Aman’thula to a remote site like this one, and attack her there? But all that may be beside the point. What are we going to *do* with them? She and the Wisdom would just as soon have us execute them, but I seem to have gotten a reprieve.”

I explained about the gold, but he didn’t seem to see much point in that – not if we had to wait much longer.

“The ship is *ready*,” he said. “We could leave any time, with or without learning any more from those two. We don’t know what’s happening on Tazzi, and whether the force that attacked here was headed there. The first word that reaches Tazzi about what’s been happening out here has to be *our* word. Which we might have lost, except for...”

That had been a close call. So many things to think about at the time; I winced at the memory. But that was then and this was now. Alexios was right. We couldn’t afford any undue delay.

And I wouldn’t be sorry to put this planet behind me. I felt no affinity for the people. Those I had seen in the streets of the capital didn’t seem to have real lives of any kind: they went about their business... and that was that. Some were curious about me; they knew who I was, they’d greet me, but only in the name of the Revolution. I didn’t want to stay around see their choreographed harvest, and certainly not visit the mines with their slave labor. I never had a chance to learn about their educational system, but it probably amounted to indoctrination.

The gold shackles arrived the next day, and we secured Dundor and Skeklor – who still insisted they had nothing more to tell us. That let us off the hook.

We contacted the Wisdom to advise her, and suggested she dispatch her police to collect them. They didn't take long to arrive; they were more muscular than natives I'd seen before, but dressed just as plainly – only they carried sidearms, and had some sort of insignia on their shoulders. I wondered if the same sort dealt with the enemies of the people at the mines; would the Aureans be taken there, or just—? Either way, it was out of our hands...

We made final calls to Aman'thula and the Wisdom to bid them farewell, and they were effusive in their gratitude – but I sensed that they weren't sorry to see the last of us, now that we were no longer needed. Could they be fearful of the future we'd told them about, that Velor would be *bringing* about? As fearful as the Aureans on Tazzi, if only they knew?

Whatever the future held, for either world, it was now time to board the scout ship and make our departure. Looking back, we could see that Freiwelt was a beautiful world... from a distance. I hoped it would become a better place to live, but I wouldn't have a hand in that – or any right to. I might be the First Protector, but I still had my limitations – as would all who followed me.

* * *

Time can seem to fly... or slow to a crawl.

It seemed to fly during three transits to Selene on the *Merchanter's Luck* route. Yes, *Selene*. That was part of the plan; I had to leave the ship before Alexios continued on to Tazzi, and I knew from experience that I could make it the rest of the way through the wormhole.

In theory, Protectors and even Messengers would be able to jump all the way from Velor to their assigned worlds, but that would require more education in wormhole physics than any of the candidates now possessed – plus a good deal of practice. I wasn't going to take any chances on this make-or-break mission. So it was get off at Selene and go to ground – nobody was supposed to know I was there but Mayra Gubin and her colleagues at the law office. There was no way to alert her in advance, but I knew I could trust her.

We couldn't predict how long it would take for Alexios to accomplish what had to be accomplished lo Tazzi – we couldn't be certain he'd succeed at all, although there was no question that he would survive. So when should I make my own reappearance?

Alexios decided to give himself, and me, a month. At noon on the appointed day, I was to appear at Cathedral Square. What I saw there would make it obvious what had gone down – or not. Either way, he'd be there to meet me.

* * *

Time dragged in Novy Kyiv. Mayra and her people were very accommodating, and very discreet. But they had other things to do, and I had to remain in the office complex and avoid any contact with anyone else – even Bensalem. The first thing I'd done was to brief Mayra on events at Velor and their implications. Bensalem would have already heard it all from the *Boundless Opportunity*, so it wasn't as if I were letting him down. But it didn't take me long to tell Mayra all there was to tell, or at least all I knew to tell – except about Alexios and what he was up to. After that, there was nothing to do but *wait*. I shared meals with her people, and a bit of small talk – but no serious conversation.

I wondered idly what Ivry was up to... but I wasn't going to mention his name, or even look it up on the World Brain.

* * *

Finally, *finally* the time had come.

I was outward bound for Tazzi. I had calculated just how long it would take – from Selene to the wormhole, through the hole, and on to Cathedral Square.

Navigating the wormhole was still tricky; I had to be sure it was in its safe phase. But this time there wasn't any pain – let Enhancement be praised with great praise! The rest was easy; I zeroed in on New London and slowed as I spotted the old cathedral that had given the square its name – a square that had in turn given its name to the seat of government. I wanted to come in slowly, and gracefully.

My heart leapt as I approached the square – it was full of *people*. I couldn't have guessed how many – tens of thousands at the very least, maybe a hundred thousand. As soon as they saw me, they began waving and cheering. Then somebody started a chant, and others took it up, until it spread across the square: ***Vespyr! Vespyr! Vespyr!***

A stage had been set up right in front of the cathedral doors; it too was crowded, but it was easy to spot Alexios, because he could rise above the rest. But that was only to direct my attention to a group behind him dressed in cloaks that concealed their faces and bodies. They now removed them to reveal... *Vaharem and his fellow Scalantrans!*

I was overcome with joy to see that our mission had been fulfilled, that our purpose had triumphed. There were more cheers as I alighted next to Alexios and the Scalantrans. But I realized that there must be still more to come, as a hush fell over the square. The teeming Tazzians must know what that would be, but I remained in the dark, even in the noonday sunshine...

Alexios rose for the occasion again, and beckoned to someone at the front of the crowd, out of sight below the stage. A political dignitary, no doubt; I could have used my tachyon vision but forebore. So I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw the familiar faces of the couple who were coming up the stairs and onto the stage.

Kevin. With Jana.

I was speechless, my mind in a turmoil as they came forward to greet me. What could I say to a man I had believed dead, and a woman I believed had betrayed him? I stammered and stammered, and finally I could get out only two words.

"But... how?"

"Long story," said Kevin.

CONCLUSION. BUT WATCH FOR A SIDEQUEL!