

Heart of Darkness

An old AU-2 tale, retold

By Sharon Best, Wolf, Tarot Barnes and Brantley Thompson Elkins

This novel from the Aurora Universe 2 continuity was begun by Shadar in 1995. I can't find a file for the version he had on his old site before I came along. In early 2003, I had begun collaborating with him on completing the story, but that effort was aborted after it had appeared in March 2003 – just before Sharon Best took his vacation, returning as Shadar a few months later.

From the Wayback Machine, here's a link to Heart of Darkness as it appeared then:

<http://web.archive.org/web/20030206105004/http://www.velorian.org/heart%20of%20darkness%20%20intro.htm>

Off and on, I've made edits off the boards to the original 2003 text, with Tarot Barnes also taking part. Some changes have to do making Avalon National Laboratory part of the structure of the Army weapons research system, others with strengthening the backstory. I came up with Engelbrecht, as a malevolent counterpart to Caultron; and Klimenko as a decent alternative; plus an enhanced account of Vickers and the Arion Prime Alya. It was Tarot who figured out how Karalyn should be revived.

It's been over 20 years since the original conception, and 13 years since the last version at the old Velorian site, to which Shadar has recently made substantial edits relating to Caultron's character in the first part of the story. But there may still be readers out there who long to revisit the AU2 of yesteryear. This version of Heart of Darkness is for them.

-- Brantley Thompson Elkins

Chapter One, Part One – Invulnerability

The Heart of Darkness

Beyond logic, there is passion.

Beyond wisdom, there is emotion.

Beyond sense, there is instinct.

Beyond deduction, there is intuition.

Beyond reason, there is DESIRE.



Thursday, 8:10am

The brooding silence of the indoor firing range at the Avalon National Laboratory was disturbed by the musical clink of brass against gun steel as a single shell was inserted into the breech of a long rifle. Then came the oiled snick of the bolt sliding home and locking.

The cool, industrial air-conditioned atmosphere of the firing range, was heavy with anticipation, and smelled faintly of stale sweat and gun oil. The deadly big-game rifle was a Mauser 454, and it had harvested more than its share of elephant and black rhino over the years. Its hot-loaded, metal-jacketed round was powerful enough to penetrate the core of a rhino and drop it in mid-charge.

Several soldiers wearing military fatigues stood in a pool of subdued lighting near one end of the long firing range. Their faces were serious, grim even, especially when they looked down range at the armored backstop. A half-dozen floodlights brilliantly illuminated a wall that was covered with six feet of Canadian hardwood. The wood overlaid a foot-thick layer of steel armor that had been salvaged from the battleship *North Carolina*.

This room was the secret firing range, used by the Tank-Automotive and Armament Command (TACOM) to test weapons too classified and/or too powerful for Picatinny Arsenal, and there wasn't a conventional weapon on Earth that the back wall of the range couldn't stop.

The first member of the team finished chambering the round into the heavy Mauser before laying the rifle down beside several similar weapons that were arranged along a row of sandbags. Like the other men, his hair was cut short and he was strongly muscled, his fatigue uniform starched and wrinkle free. The men were all members of an elite group of Army Rangers on a Top Secret assignment to TACOM.

The silence of the huge room was broken again when two Marines arrived to work on their assigned weapons. The loading lever of a 7.62 mm Vulcan Gatling gun was cycled noisily, the motorized gun giving of a whirling clink of gun steel and brass. The Vulcan was one of the deadliest weapons on Earth, as its rotating barrels were capable of firing a hundred rounds of armor-piercing ammunition

each second. It could shred a military helicopter apart or mow down a battalion of men in seconds.

The metallic sound of its loading was joined by the heavy clank and ratcheting cock of a .50 caliber M92 heavy machine gun. It was loaded with a belt of depleted Uranium ammunition. The uranium-tipped bullets of this particular M92 had recently become infamous in the Kosovo fighting for punching holes in the latest model of a United States Army Bradley APC. The incident had been called "friendly fire," although there had been nothing friendly about the way the flesh and bones of the American soldiers inside the Bradley had been torn apart by the unstoppable bullets.

The fourth weapon was an M23 grenade launcher, and this particular weapon had come into the possession of the FBI after having been used to blow up a school bus full of senior citizens in Miami. The terrorist who had bought it on the black market had been cut down by a fusillade of bullets from the FBI, but not before he'd blown that bus and four private cars apart like tin cans with a cherry bomb inside. The explosive round of an M23 was lethal to anyone within ten meters of its burst.

The weapons that were to be fired this morning had been selected because they were the deadliest Infantry weapons of their class on Earth. They all had blood on them. Proven killers all.

Yet the brutal lethality of all these conventional weapons was eclipsed by a new class of weapon, one which had been used in anger but a single time. That weapon was under the control of a man in civilian attire who was typing on the keyboard of a glowing touch-panel that was set into the side of a bulky silver box. The box hardly looked like a gun, what with the dozen silver hoses that connected it to a steaming vacuum tank that stood beside it. The only suggestion that it had lethal power was the short, thick tube of crystal that extended from one end to point downrange like the other weapons. The weapon was called an UltLas, which stood for Ultraviolet Laser.

The high-pitched whine of the laser's super-conducting capacitors scaled upward, the sound quickly rising to the limit of human hearing. The soldiers

covered their ears as the screaming whine of its charging circuit peaked and then thankfully went ultrasonic. At the same time, a blanket of white frost began to form around the center of the weapon, and on the container of liquid helium that supplied the super-cold liquefied gas to cool the capacitive discharge chamber at the heart of the machine.

Despite the extreme secrecy surrounding the UltLas, this wasn't the weapon's first field test. Like the Uranium-depleted M92 machine gun, it had secretly been tested in the Yugoslavian war. There it had been successfully used against big game targets, specifically the advanced Russian T90 tanks that had rumbled through the outskirts of Kosovo. The Russian main battle tanks had been outfitted in the latest in ceramic armor and reactive armor, its tough hide impenetrable by existing anti-tank weapons.

This single weapon had secretly turned the balance of the war and had given NATO a victory that had seemed to be beyond their grasp. From the day of its deployment, any enemy tank that came within a kilometer of the Black Ops unit that wielded it had died instantly. The weapon's red targeting laser would briefly settle on the hull of the tank before an invisible beam of death would rip the air apart like lightning, melting its way through the ceramic armor to uselessly detonate the reactive armor before burning a hole through the hull, pushing a violent spray of molten steel ahead of it to vaporize the tank crew a half second before detonating any exposed rounds.

Yet as deadly as the UltLas was against heavy armor, few people outside the Avalon Laboratory knew that the UltLas had never been intended for use against something as frail as military armor. It had been built for defense against a far tougher target, one which walked on two legs.

A target that was not native to planet Earth.

Specifically, a race of beings that posed the most serious risk to an apex species' survival since the extinction event that killed the dinosaurs. The next apex species of Earth?

The thought of humanity being displaced from its home, with billions of lives lost, turned his heart to cold stone. At the same time, a massive door near the

end of the range opened, and one of *them* stepped into view, and walked over to stand against the backstop.

He reined in wildly conflicting emotions as he forced himself to lean down to stare at the screen of the small TV camera that served as the weapon's sight. He carefully centered the crosshairs in the exact middle of a small red 'V' rune that decorated the gentle rising and falling curves of the target. Satisfied that the temperamental tracking laser was working this morning, Jim Caultron stood up to take off his glasses and look down range.

A hundred yards away, a very pretty teenage girl stood barefoot with her back to the hardwood wall. She was dressed in a leotard that appeared to be made of a polished silver metal film, accented by a blue mini-skirt that revealed very long, bare legs. The leotard tapered around her neck to a midnight-blue choker, leaving her shoulders and arms bare. The metal film looked like polished silver from some angles, and as black as onyx from others. It was, in reality, mirror bright. The red 'V' that Jim Caultron locked the laser sight onto was the only decoration that broke the reflective shine of the metal film. It was the symbol of her proud race, the V standing for Velorian, and it was appropriately located in the exact middle of one proudly uplifted breast.

The girl's name was Karalyn Jones.

He lifted his eyes from the sights as he marveled at how different she looked this morning. Barefoot and dressed in her native flight uniform now, she truly looked the part of the alien goddess that she had proven to be. The healthy glow of her smoothly tanned skin and her glowing blonde hair were both dazzling and strangely intimidating at the same time. She was beautiful beyond the boundaries that simple human words could describe. She might as well have stepped from the pages of the ancient mythology of Earth.

A small, hard knot formed again in Jim Caultron's stomach as he was reminded of Karalyn's extreme physical strength. He couldn't look at her without being reminded of the horror of Brenda's death, and then his wife Shirley's presumed death. Five years had passed, but it was still fresh in his memory.

His wife had been working for the CIA in those days, in Humint. She handled several confidential informants — and sometimes she debriefed defectors. It was in Boulder, Colorado that she met an informant who'd walked in from the street with inside knowledge about several recent terrorist attacks. Shirley had assumed the informant was associated with one of the radical Islamic groups, or maybe even the Russians, although she looked like neither. What she discovered was far worse.

She found herself facing a remarkably tall black-haired Nordic woman who claimed she was a member of an extraterrestrial super-race that had come here to conquer Earth. She claimed her people, the Arions, had inserted moles at high levels in the governments of the United States and all other major powers. She would help Shirley identify them.

Shirley had laughed at the woman's preposterous claim, only to have the woman reach down to slowly pull Shirley's sidearm from her holster. Shirley tried to resist her with all her might, but the woman was terrifyingly strong and seeming made of steel.

The potential defector gave Shirley a superior little smile as she jammed the barrel of the 9mm Beretta against her own temple and pulled the trigger again and again, each loud report sending her long hair flying in a flurry of sparks. Then she handed the hot, smoking sidearm back to Shirley, her arrogant smile never leaving her face. She told Shirley their would be future meetings, and then vanished out the door so quickly that she left but a blurred image behind.

Shirley was so alarmed by what she'd heard and seen that she teleconferenced with David Childers, chief of the Directorate of Operations, while immediately flying back to Washington. Despite Shirley's reputation in the agency, Childers treated her as if she was recounting an episode of *The X-Files*. He told her to report to the staff psychologist for clearance before she returned to her office. Then he hung up on her.

Shirley was so upset about his response that she violated protocol and went to the Defense Intelligence Agency. The DIA wasn't any more receptive, and she caught hell from Director Childers for going off the reservation. But she had one

button left. She'd recently traveled abroad with the Secretary of Defense, and she used their friendship to schedule an emergency meeting with him.

She took her sister Brenda with her to the meeting given she was a former DIA agent. In so doing, she signed her death warrant.

Brenda was found horribly mutilated in her car the next day. The car had been torn apart and crushed, but there was no indication how. It had been found in the middle of a farm in Virginia, not far from DIA headquarters. State police had grilled the farmer, who didn't have any idea how the car could have gotten there – there weren't any tracks or signs that it had been dragged.

"It has to be *them*," Shirley had whispered to Jim, desperately breaking her sworn confidentiality to illegally share classified information with him. She'd told him everything.

Unlike the others, he believed her. His wife was the most rational person he'd ever known. It was the last conversation they ever had.

His wife didn't come home from work the next day. The Agency claimed they had no idea where she was.

Jim knew, for there was a hole in his heart. She was dead. She had to be. He didn't want to think about the *how*. But he knew *why*. And most importantly, *who*.

The Arions.

Unlike the others, the military listened. The DIA had recently lost soldiers fighting a new and unknown threat. One that could rip tanks apart as easily as paper toys. That was how Jim Caultron came to be transferred to the Commander of Fort Dietrick, Maryland who had in turn send him here to this black research laboratory at a remote site in southern New Jersey.

Fort Dietrick had been notorious during the Cold War for its biological and chemical weapons research, including experiments on humans. President Nixon had shut that program down in late 1969, after asking the Senate to belatedly ratify the 1925 Geneva Protocol banning the use of such weapons. Research of course continued — but supposedly on defensive measures and treatments.

Not *quite* true as he learned while reporting for duty under Max Engelbrecht, Director of Special Projects at Avalon Laboratory.

“We have been doing some very *in-ter-est-ing* work here,” he told Caultron that first day, drawing out the word. “But now that we have a new Enemy to consider, we must develop even more *in-ter-est-ing* measures.”

Engelbrecht paused for a moment to look into Jim’s eyes. He’d studied every word of Jim’s report of his late wife’s fantastic meeting. He saw the heart of a true believer. A man who had already suffered a personal loss in a war that mercifully few people knew was coming.

“James,” he said, a look of seeming pain and sympathy on his face. “We must stop these alien bastards at all costs. Can we count on you?”

Of course they could count of him. He had two deaths to avenge. And billions more to prevent.

That had led to his recent meeting with yet another extra-terrestrial, one that the Pentagon had been observing for some time. Her name was Karalyn Jones.

Karalyn wasn’t an Arion, but she came from that same terrible species. As such she bore indirect responsibility for his pain and sorrow. It was her dark cousins who’d killed the woman he loved.

Yet he knew in his heart that Karalyn Jones herself was an innocent. Her only guilt was the accident of her birth and her travel to Earth. It was a contradiction that his mind could not resolve.

Yet even as the burning, vengeful anger of his wife’s death filled his thoughts, a gentler part of his soul was drawn to her, even entranced. He’d never seen such beauty.

He could still feel the memory of the wild pleasures and forbidden indiscretions he had shared with this girl only hours before – pleasures he had tried to justify as part of his “research” into the potential weaknesses of a young woman who represented everything that the human race on Earth had struggled to resist. Racial superiority, sexual exploitation and outright slavery; these were the hallmarks of the dark side of the master race that blatantly called itself *Homo*

Sapiens Supremis. Karalyn Jones had been born a Supremis, and despite her stated goal to protect those she'd insultingly called the "simple, frail people of Earth," she was the golden personification of human development gone mad. An engineered being of ultimate power.

Karalyn and her people had been genetically enhanced beyond even the wildest imagination of a Terran scientist. She claimed to be a member of one of the two branches of a common race who considered themselves a vastly superior sub-species of human. The Arion Empire and the Velorian Enlightenment, both were blatantly supremacist and they were both personifications of evil itself, at least in Jim Caultron's feverish mind.

Unlike the raven-haired woman that Shirley had met, Karalyn belonged to the branch which called themselves Velorians. Their stated goal was that of protecting emerging planets from the efforts of the Arion Empire to enslave all of humanity. More than just a racial difference, the *Homo Sapiens Supremis* subspecies was the ultimate in black or white hats, yet their self-described name spoke volumes about their intentions.

Supremis.

Superior.

Physically, they absolutely were.

Yet unlike the handful of others in the U.S. government who knew the secret of the Supremis, Caultron was not a man who believed in absolute superiority, and he most certainly did not believe in the myth of invulnerability. His entire career had been dedicated to finding the chinks in an enemy's most advanced armor. Surely this pretty girl had a flaw that he could exploit.

Once he found it, he could develop weapons to defeat her Arion cousins. Such was his passion, driven both from his deep-seated American patriotism and his obligation to all of humanity. But stronger than either of those was the hatred born of the everlasting horror of his step-sister and wife's deaths at the hands of the Arions.

He was determined to break this girl when everyone else had failed.

He closed his eyes as he struggled to keep his emotions under control, blinking a moment later to dispel a tear. He wiped that away as he glanced around to see that the soldiers had finished their work. The men were standing alert and at loose attention behind their weapons, wide-open eyes staring downrange, studying the slender blond girl who was their morning's target. Their eyes reflected the same sense of unreality that he'd felt since meeting Karalyn Jones. They all knew how completely preposterous it was that they were about to expend all these weapons of destruction in the direction of such a pretty girl.

Jim closed his mind to that thought as reminded himself that the soldier's weapons would not harm her. He focused instead on the fact that she was *Homo Sapiens Supremis*, and her unforgivable crime was being born.

He blinked his eyes again to wash the echo of her glowing beauty and the memories of last night from his mind. Glancing up at the VIP observation windows, he saw that the top brass were clearly running late, presumably because of the last minute request by the President of the United States to observe the test firing. Everything got fouled up whenever the Secret Service was involved.

He took advantage of the delay to reach for his pack of cigarettes and shook one out to light it up. His hands were shaking, but his first long inhalation of smoke cleared his mind and steadied his nerves. Yet despite his best effort to focus, he found himself thinking back to his first meeting with this alien girl. A meeting that had turned into the most erotic night of his life. An eroticism he'd blatantly exploited to learn far more about this inexperienced girl than the test plan had called for.

Closing his eyes, his thoughts moved backward to the previous afternoon.

The day before, 5:50pm, the Lodge

He'd been standing in the lobby of the huge lodge a few miles from the Avalon laboratory, waiting nervously for his first meeting with the girl whom the DIA hierarchy simply called "The Subject."

He'd spent the last two months studying this alien girl's background, devouring everything that had ever been recorded or observed about her abilities. He'd seen videos of her gently lifting a massively heavy railroad locomotive back onto its track, and he'd seen her float weightlessly upward to retrieve a frightened cat from the top of a tall tree and return the beloved pet to a young girl who'd had stars in her eyes. He'd studied countless hours of surveillance videos that showed her blending in with the ordinary kids at her high school in LA, and he'd seen her flashing from the ground to intercept an ICBM in mid-flight, her speed outdistancing the best anti-missile weapon system on Earth. He'd seen her sharing secret kisses in the back of a movie theater with her boyfriend, and he'd seen a video of her fearlessly straddling a nuclear bomb as it was detonated deep under ground. The paradox of her youthful beauty and supreme power and seemingly total invulnerability defied all the preconceptions of femininity that he'd been raised to understand.

So it was that Jim Caultron decided to kill her.

It wasn't personal. His chosen mission in life was to create weapon systems that defeated enemy armor. He was a weapons engineer and he was the best there was at developing anti-tank weapons. His job and his passion was to find a way to defeat "The Subject."

"The Subject."

He hated that sanitized name. Her name was Karalyn, and she was arguably the most beautiful young woman on planet Earth. A supergirl who could fly as freely as a bird, a girl who could bend hard steel and squish it in her bare hands as easily as his youngest daughter could squish a blob of PlayDoh.

Karalyn was also legally a minor, but it could be argued that those laws only applied to humans. She was an alien who had been declared a threat to the future of the entire human race. Karalyn Jones wasn't completely human.

Not human. The very concept made Jim's blood boil. Earth was for humans, not for interlopers from distant stars. Angry at the intrusion, Jim had thrown himself into his work. He'd spent sleepless nights pouring over the data and reports, some of them sketchy, some of them brilliantly clear video tapes. In the

process of studying her, he'd learned a great deal about this girl who pretended to be human. And in every way visible to her schoolmates and friends, she was. They were, all of them, deceived.

Unfortunately, his studies hadn't relieved the anxiety and suppressed anger he was feeling as he stood in the lobby waiting to meet her. A small voice kept reminding him that he was about to have dinner with a girl who might as well have stepped from the pages of Earth's mythology. A teenage girl as she appeared to be, but also a goddess that would have felt at home in immortal Olympus.

Those strangely compelling thoughts made the simple act of breathing difficult. He cursed his weakness as he struggled for control of his emotions, telling himself that she was just a girl, her experiences limited. He was a grown man. A man who unfortunately knew better than to have arranged this dinner with "The Subject."

That thought strangely encouraged him. Painting outside the lines was his specialty. He'd never done anything by the book, so why this? Breakthroughs didn't come by following in others' footsteps. Smiling as his confidence rose, he shook a cigarette out of his pack and lit it up while standing in front of the No Smoking sign. He prided himself on being a renegade. Of never following rules.

He was also the most respected anti-armor engineer in the United States. It was his unconventionality that made him successful.

The appointed meeting time of 6:00 PM came and went as Jim considered and quickly dismissed a dozen women as they came through the doorway. None were young enough or blonde enough or pretty enough to be "The Subject." But then, just as he was beginning to doubt that she was going to show, a slender girl in her mid-teens appeared as if by magic inside the front door. She was casually dressed in denim, her long hair tied back as if she'd been swimming and hadn't had time to shower.

The entire room seemed to warm a few degrees as Jim found himself drawn to her radiant blonde hair. Her red lips and her sparkling blue eyes seemed to

draw all the light in the room toward her. She was a beacon of loveliness that made every man's heart skip a beat.

Everyone turned to stare at her in stunned fascination as she slowly scanned the crowd in return. Her eyes seemed to sparkle with their own light as she avoided the men's eyes to stare well below the level of their faces, her eyes pausing briefly to stare at each man's waist before moving on.

Until she got to Jim that is. Her gaze froze momentarily before rising upward to flash him the most beautiful smile he'd ever seen. He felt his heart leap from his chest as he felt for all the world as if he was staring into the golden sun of a tropical dawn, punctuated by the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. Beauty beyond description.

His thoughts raced in several directions as the analytical part of him remembered reading an FBI report that described how Karalyn Jones had been observed scanning a crowd to read the ID cards in people's wallets. He felt a sudden and overwhelming desire to cross his hands in front of himself.

The girl walked directly toward him, her posture absolutely perfect, her movements as smooth and precise as a runway model, yet her floating steps suggested the strength of a trained athlete. She flowed through the jostling crowd like a dolphin through water, her body never touching another's as the crowd parted for her.

Jim found himself staring at her as he came to the conclusion that the reports on her were wrong. She wasn't simply a girl in the midst of becoming a beautiful woman; she already was one. The look in her eyes was anything but innocent. Yet she seemed to have a strange angelic glow about her, her tangled hair and blue eyes seemingly giving off more light than they took in. Jim blinked his eyes to dispel the lingering illusion that he was truly meeting an angel from the heavens above.

"You must be James Caultron," she said in a musical voice as she arrived to hold out her hand to him. "I'm Karalyn Jones, and I'm told I have a dinner appointment with you."

Her accent startled him. It was vaguely Parisian, but with a touch of Valley Girl. Jim hesitated as a brief image flashed across his mind of her stunning the Marines at Camp Pendleton by working a block of stainless steel in her grip with all the dexterity of an sculptor working his blob of clay. He shook off that strangely intimidating image as he bravely gave his hand up to her cool handshake.

“Indeed we do have an appointment, Karalyn, and I’m so very glad to meet you, especially here in the middle of the week. I understand you can’t always fly out here on such short notice.”

Jim was surprised at how calm his voice sounded. He certainly didn’t feel calm inside, especially when he talked of her power of flight. The concept of flying as free as a bird was a fantasy that went back to the very origins of the human race.

She laughed. “Hey, any excuse to get out of Geometry for a day is cool with me, Mr. Caultron,” she said. “And I’m sorry I’m late, but I was heading for Mr. Lambert’s class fifteen minutes ago when I realized that you’re three time zones ahead of us here in New Jersey, not two.”

“Fifteen minutes ago?” Jim said in a wondering voice as he glanced at his watch. “But I thought you lived in LA?”

“Yeah, that’s why I had to really hustle. Unfortunately, even I can’t fly across the country eastward to arrive before I left; although that’s easy enough going west. Time-zone wise at least.”

Jim’s imagination raced as he tried to imagine her hypersonic eastward dash from LA to Brighton, New Jersey in less than a quarter hour – her trail of sonic booms must have startled people all the way across the nation.

“A beautiful woman such as yourself can never truly be late, Karalyn,” he replied smoothly. “And you can forget the Mr. Caultron stuff. We’re pretty informal here, so just call me Jim like most everyone else does. Except for my staff; I think they have some less charitable names for me. ‘Crazy Bastard’ comes immediately to mind.”

“That’s so cool,” Karalyn giggled softly as his casual compliment on her appearance made her blush a little. Other adults became stiff and patronizing once they learned who she was. Either that, or they poked at her with their scientific instruments while staring at their screens.

“Oh, before I forget,” Karalyn said quickly, explaining that her Math class was meeting back in LA at this very moment. “I’ll need a good written excuse for Mr. Lambert. I’m always getting in trouble for dashing off like this. My Principal thinks I hang with surfers mostly, and they’re always skipping school to ride waves and smoke weed. Wouldn’t he be surprised if he knew I was hanging with you secret government scientist guys here in Jersey trying to save the universe?”

“Well, Karalyn, we’re all here to help with the defense of Earth and I’m personally thrilled that a beautiful woman like you is on our team. A note to your teacher is the least of my problems.”

Despite the formality of Jim’s rehearsed statement, Karalyn’s face lit up like the morning sun coming from behind a cloud. It was the second time in as many minutes that he’d called her beautiful, not to mention a woman. She surprised herself by noticing that Jim Caultron was a very handsome man himself. His rugged face and strong features marked him as an outdoorsman, a man of many adventures, yet there was a hardness about him that she found intriguing, especially the way his gray eyes refused to warm despite his smiles. He was strong, he was self-assured and he was confident of his own powers. More than anything else, Karalyn admired well-earned confidence in a man, which was why she liked older men.

“So, lets see, three thousand miles in fifteen minutes,” Jim mused as he did a quick calculation in his head. “I thought I read somewhere that you could only fly at Mach five?”

“True, that’s pretty much my limit inside the atmosphere. Maybe Mach Six in a real pinch. But I did my suborby thingy just now to get here in a hurry.”

Jim looked at her blankly.

“Suborby,” Karalyn said with a giggle. “You know, like sub-orbital? I can go really fast outside the atmosphere, although I suspect my near vertical re-entry

over Pennsylvania scared a few people. I look like a meteor from *Deep Impact* or something when I come down that fast.”

Despite his long preparation for this meeting, Jim found that he was stunned by the simple realization that the girl who held his arm had been in outer space only moments before. Everything, from her overly firm handshake to her freshly-scrubbed blond looks to her casual jeans with the torn knees and her turned up collar of her denim jacket to the bright healthiness of her skin tones, took his breath away. His imagination soared as he tried to imagine what it must feel like to fly up into space and then dive down like a flaming meteor.

“You make it sound so casual, Karalyn,” he finally said, a note of awe in his voice. “Almost like you just found a shortcut to the local 7-11 or something.”

Karalyn gave him a cute shrug. “Well, it is a shortcut, time-wise at least, and the vacuum and heat don’t really bother me much. I’m tougher than I look.”

Jim struggled to push his surging emotions back where they belonged, yet he couldn’t help but wonder at the purpose behind the engineering imperative to artificially create someone this profoundly attractive and this immensely strong. Was her beauty a simple ploy to disarm her enemies, most of who were probably male? Few men would equate such slender beauty with raw muscular power, nor would they connect her youthful blondness with the sharp intelligence that she was reputed to have.

He wondered if the purpose of her appearance was to capitalize on anyone who underestimated her based merely on her appearance. Or did that hint in the Roswell Archives about the Velorians being “vessels of the gods” describe the true purpose of her existence? Most of the translators of the Archives had turned the word “vessel” into “tool” while portraying the Velorians as guardians. Yet Jim remembered that one of the translators had insisted the word “vessel” actually meant “procreator,” someone who bore new gods from her body.

He briefly imagined the lightning and thunder and earthshaking power of the gods of human mythology. That thought was followed by a brief and inappropriate imagine of God having an orgasm. His power would probably be sufficient to shake a planet to its roots.

Yet for all his wild imaginations, she didn't look anything like the near omnipotent warrior-cum-Goddess that the Archives had spoken of, a woman who could smash an Arion battle fleet apart with her bare hands. He had a sudden vision of a tiny mouse turning aside a herd of stampeding African elephants.

"A penny for your thoughts," Karalyn asked as she heard him chuckle to himself.

"Oh, I was just thinking of elephants and mice and the lopsided battles between them. Of how a single mouse can turn aside the charge of a herd of elephants. I rather think you are the mouse to our Arion elephants."

Karalyn's eyebrows raised. "You think I look like a mouse?" She said as she tilted her head at him. "Does that mean I'm mousy?"

Jim laughed heartily as he saw the twinkle in her eye. "No, no, you look beautiful, Karalyn. It's only an allegory."

"Oh... sure," she winked at him, trying to act as if she understood.

Jim's thoughts raced faster as he studied her. He'd spent days studying the extensive checks into her background. A great deal of time had been lost in just trying to find the Velorian Protector on Earth, the search starting after the first translations of the Roswell Archives in the 60's.

Karalyn had been discovered by pure luck. An FBI agent at a diving competition at Oceanside High had spotted her when she'd unwisely decided to add a couple of points to her score by hanging in mid-air just a bit too long. Lost in reflection about his new assignment to the X Project as he pretended to watch the diving match, the agent had been working on building a profile of what a Velorian would act like in public when he'd seen his mental image taking life in the form of Karalyn Jones' slow-motion dive.

Several months of frantic activity and a great deal of discrete surveillance had followed that breathless phone call to the FBI field office. A call that eventually led to the FBI making First Contact with an alien being in late May of 1999.

The men in dark suits had looked nervous as they sat across the table from Karalyn Jones in the Los Angeles field office, her step-mother sitting beside her.

The Special Agents had looked so serious that Karalyn had to work hard to keep from breaking into helpless giggles as she stared back at them. Every time she started to giggle, her mother would give her hand a squeeze to quiet her.

The FBI agents leveled with Karalyn and her mother as they told them everything they knew about the Supremis. They'd then began working down a list of a hundred new questions. Karalyn answered those she could and her mother answered a few more. The agents recorded the interview and then asked them to wait in the conference room while they went out to discuss what they'd learned.

Instead of waiting, Karalyn followed them out into the office area — after noisily tearing the reinforced door of the conference room off its hinges.

The startled men had spun around with drawn weapons as they insisted that Karalyn stay in the room and wait for them to return. It was a serious mistake, and her angry reaction to having a dozen guns pointed at her mother was more that of a pissed-off teenage girl from LA than a Protector from Velor. It took her a half second to collect a half-dozen government-issue automatics and one sub-machine gun. It took her a half minute to slowly and deliberately crush them together in her incredible grip until they'd merged into a shapeless ball of smoking gun steel.

The only sound in the room when she was done was that of the wheezing AirCon and a dozen pounding hearts as she calmly set the faintly glowing steel ball on a secretary's desk before taking her startled step-mother's hand in hers and walking out the door. Nobody got in her way after that.

Despite the difficulty of her first abortive meeting with the US government, that face to face contact with the FBI had actually been informative for Karalyn, for she'd grown up imagining that she was some kind of mutant. Her theories came from the X-Men comics and they suggested to her that her real Mom must have been in some nuclear genetic testing program or whatever. She was an avid comic-book reader, and in doing so, she'd found one character she could identify with in those books — it was of course the Kryptonian girl named Supergirl. Flying around her bedroom at the age of seven while wearing a pair of red underpants with an hand-painted 'S' on them and a red towel for a cape,

she'd often fantasized that she'd actually been born a Kryptonian. She'd made a costume for herself at age eight that looked exactly like that comic book character and had taken to flying out her window at night to save some cat that was caught in a tree or to capture some burglars who made the mistake of breaking into the neighbor's house.

Her parents, of course, tried to talk Karalyn out of her night-time exploits, especially after she came home at the age of ten with her costume torn off and then again at the age of eleven with a half-dozen bullet holes in the big 'S' of her blue top. A quick trip to the bathroom and a look under the shirt had convinced her mom that she truly was an invulnerable girl, for the only evidence of that lethal violence were the lead smears that peppered her budding breasts. That alone bothered her mother, for Karalyn was far more physically mature than any eleven year old girl had a right to be. She went out the next day and bought Karalyn a bra.

As Mormons, Karalyn's parents simply wanted her to grow up to be a nice girl and marry a nice man and have a happy family. Life was simple for the true believers in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and goddesses were not part of their religion. Nor were aliens from outer-space, not to mention a young girl who could bench-press Cadillacs one-handed and bounce bullets from her sometimes scandalously bare chest while trying to catch dangerous criminals that were beyond the abilities of the local cops to apprehend.

In the end, it was Karalyn's coming of age as a woman and her immersion into the frenetic world of high school that served to dampen her fantasies of superheroism. She quickly learned that fitting in was important and that being cute and popular and active in school activities was all she wanted from life at that age. Even more importantly, she discovered boys.

Karalyn Jones liked boys, more than anything else she knew, and that feeling was more than returned. Between her phenomenal good looks and her eager willingness to both experiment and push boundaries, she was on the top of every guy's private list of dream dates. Just being around her seemed to light up

the air. No one, least of all Karalyn, realized that, unlike humans who have lost the ability, Velorians emit powerful pheromones when aroused.

Boys weren't her only focus thought. Her dreams were filled with exploits where she became a crime fighter like the comic-book Supergirl. She had no idea where her powers came from, and the first she'd heard of Velorians came when the DIA interviewed her. She decided to act out her dreams at age of fifteen when she and a girlfriend had dressed up in rented Supergirl costumes from a party shop for last Fall's school Halloween party. Karalyn had been the hit of the party, stunning both her classmates and the teachers and parents who were chaperoning the event, all of them suffering her pheromones. She looked so natural in such a tiny costume and cape, her body so perfectly fit that she defied imagination, but even more from her amazing jump off the eighth floor roof to dive vertically into the hotel pool. A feat that thankfully no one else attempted to match, for they would have surely died. She'd gotten so into it that she was tempted to lift off and fly over her friend's heads to complete the image of a girl from a distant star, but fortunately step-brother talked her out of it. Being that he was largely immune to her pheromones, thanks to long exposure, he was still thinking straight.

So it was with a shock when Karalyn's fantasy of secretly being a Kryptonian was finally been destroyed during that DIA interview. The agents freaked her out by revealing that she was not only a member of a very dangerous alien race, but that they'd been spying on her for months. She responded by ripping the lock off yet another conference room door on her way out, proving beyond any doubt that case-hardened steel was no more challenging to her grip than modeling clay was to anyone else's.

Despite her angry outburst, Karalyn had returned to the DIA office the next day to talk. It wasn't clear who was more surprised to find her there: the agents who'd been filling out "weapon lost" paperwork all night long or Karalyn herself. After a brief apology and much shaking of hands, the agents had let her read the thick file they had on Velorians, most of the information having been gleaned from Arion spaceships that had crashed on Earth several decades earlier, all of

them in the vast and empty desert southwest of the United States. It was the DIA's belief that the Arions had been infiltrating the US for decades, but seemingly no where else on Earth. The uncomfortable conclusion of the Agency was that the Arions knew a soft target when they saw it.

Wanting to know more than the agents had shared, Karalyn returned to break into the DIA vault in the basement of the LA Federal Building later the same night. She sat calmly on the vault floor until dawn reading the entirety of the Roswell Archive, all the while ignoring the armed men who'd responded to the alarm. When they insisted she leave, she glanced up long enough to send a shower of sparks flying as she used the heat of her eyes to fuse the hinges of the mangled vault door closed to keep the soldiers on their side of it.

That led to some demonstrations out at Area 51 in the Nevada desert which proved that Karalyn had no real idea of what her limits were. She was also very self-conscious about men's reactions to her after she straddled that small nuke during an underground detonation. Thanks to her enhanced hearing, she'd overheard more than a few whispered jokes that the authors would have been mortified to know she'd heard. She never explained why she suddenly quit participating in the testing.

Now she was under Jim's care, along with all her unknowns.

"Karalyn, I don't think you have an extra gram of fat on your body," Jim remarked a half hour later as he watched her polishing off her second huge Porterhouse steak, "but you eat like an NFL lineman in training camp. How do you keep that figure and eat like that?"

Karalyn swallowed her mouthful as she wiped a bit of steak sauce from her lips. "Simple. I don't eat for calories or nutrition, I get all I need of that from the dimensional flux. I just like good food and I'd run my parents broke if I ate like this at home."

"Dimensional flux?" Jim said with a puzzled look.

"There was mention of it in Roswell Archives," she said with a mouthful as she waved a fork in the air. "Near as I could tell, its some kind of alternate

dimension of pure energy. I couldn't possibly draw enough calories from food to power my body – just the flight from LA to here probably used a zillion of them.

“A zillion, huh?”

Karalyn shrugged as she swallowed another huge piece of Kansas beef. “Whatever. I don't really know a lot about it. All I know is that it's embarrassing when I absorb too much.”

“You can overdose?”

She giggled as she leaned closer to Jim. “Yeah. Imagine me in a D-cup bra.”

Jim looked down at the firm rise of Karalyn's chest. He had to blink his eyes to dispel the disturbingly sexy thought that came to mind.

“So, where does it all go,” Jim asked as he looked down at her tiny waist. “All that food I mean. You've eaten enough steak to bloat a horse, yet your stomach is just as tiny and flat as it was when...”

“My body metabolizes the food really fast,” she interrupted. “It's like 100% efficient or something, and given my muscle tone, my stomach isn't about to stretch from mere eating. You know, my Abs of Steel and all that jazz. I could probably eat forever and never get full.”

“Ah, a dream come true for the millions of struggling members of Weight Watchers,” Jim mused as he thought of a member of his staff who's waistline showed that he enjoyed eating almost as much as Karalyn did. “But we do need to get you out of here before the kitchen staff collapses. The waiters have worn a path in the carpet from the kitchen to our table.”

“Ha, ha, funny man,” Karalyn said with a twinkle in her eye as she finally put her fork down to signal that she was done.

Jim rose to take her arm as she rose smoothly to her feet, seemingly weightless. She moved beside him like a sensuous dream, her body moving with this as the two of them walked from the dining room and into the smoking lounge. They settled into a huge leather couch that was located just in front of the lounge's fireplace. Jim put a cigarette between his lips and was reaching for his matches when a pale beam flashed from Karalyn's eyes to ignite the tip of his cigarette. Startled, he watched as Karalyn munched a breadstick as she untied

her sneakers. She surprised him yet again by expertly flipping them across the room with her toes. Both shoes landed exactly side-by-side in the far corner.

"Neat trick," Jim remarked as he looked over his shoulder to see where the shoes had landed.

Karalyn shrugged. "Lighting your cigarette or the shoe toss?"

"The shoe toss. My dinner dates always light my cigarettes."

"Easy enough once you get the hang of it," Karalyn smiled at him as she knew what had really impressed him. Most men had a thing for her blue eyes, although those who knew were terrified of her heat vision.

"Easy, huh. Twenty foot toss, over the back of the couch, both shoes bounce once and land side by side as if you placed them there by hand. Real easy."

"Well, I do have a few physical talents, Mr. Caultron."

"Beyond eating and lighting cigarettes?" Jim smiled broadly. "I guess those other talents are what we're here to talk about."

"Ok, fire away. What' a want to know about me?" she said as she took a final bite of her breadstick.

"Oh, something simple. Like how the two of us are going to save the Earth," Jim said softly. "Oh, and maybe the meaning of the universe and everything that is, you know, while we're at it."

Karalyn wormed her way deeper into the huge couch as she giggled. "Gee, and I thought you wanted to talk about something serious."

"Well, you know, you aren't from..."

"Forty-two," she interrupted suddenly.

"What?" Jim asked.

"Forty-two. You know, the meaning of life and everything that is. Douglas Adams figured it out a long time ago. Surely you've read *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*? He was right. You can trust me, 'cause I'm an alien from outer space and I know this kind of stuff."

She rested her foot in his lap to wiggle it playfully, reminding him that she didn't really know anymore about the meaning of the universe than he did.

“So, do you really gallivant around the galaxy in nothing more than your birthday suit as the reports claim?”

“Not normally, That would be scandalous and inappropriate, Mr. Jim Caultron. I almost always wear that silvery thingy of mine. Never know who you might run into out there.”

“Have you?”

“Have I what?”

“Run into anyone?”

“Ah, he asks the big question. Are we alone? Is this all there is?”

“I guess I already know part of that. You’re sitting here. The Arions are here.”

“Then obviously Earth isn’t alone.”

“No, I mean other life forms,” he asked. “I understand that *you*, the Supremis race, descended from people here on Earth. I’m talking about totally different life forms – non-human ones.”

Karalyn shrugged one shoulder. “You got me. I don’t even know how I got here or my people got there, and I sure haven’t run into anyone else, although I’ve not traveled very far outside the Sol system. All I know for sure is that the universe is an awful big place. As Jodie Foster said in *Contact*, ‘*If we’re alone, then it’s an awful waste of space.*’”

“It must be beautiful out there.”

Karalyn’s eyes began to sparkle as she looked up at the ceiling, her eyes taking on a far-away look. “It truly is beautiful, Jim. The stars are so brilliant once you get outside the boundaries of Sol and away from all the dust and rock that fill our solar system. I once spent an entire day laying on my back on the far side of Pluto just staring out as far as I could into space. It was totally awesome. But I didn’t see anything that looked like life. Just a lot of really cool stars and exploding supernovas and brilliant gas clouds and stuff like that. If there are other people out there, then they’re a very long way away. You’d need a starship to get there, and I’m fresh out of those.”

“Your people’s dark side, the Arion Empire, they obviously have such ships.”

Karalyn's gaze came back to his. "I don't know any more than you about them, but obviously I got here as a baby, and they've been coming here for some time. The crashed ships prove that much."

"That's why we have to talk, Karalyn. It's up to us to find a way to stop them."

"I like the 'we' word," Karalyn said softly. "Until today, it was just little 'old me. Planetary Protector Second Class Karalyn Jones of Oceanside, California, USA, Earth. The rookie who doesn't have a clue."

Despite himself, Jim felt himself starting to fall for the magic of Karalyn Jones. Even more excitingly, for the first time in five years he found himself talking to someone who clearly understood the peril that lay in Earth's immediate future. First his wife and then he had been sounding that alarm in government offices years, but until this last year, no one had listened. Now they were all listening, for many of them had met or heard about the amazing physical powers of Karalyn Jones.

They finally understood that the Roswell Archives had spoken truly of the threat facing Earth. But few believed that Karalyn was here to fight beside them no matter what the cost. Jim wanted to believe that her deepest loyalties were with Earth, and not with her dark cousins. That she *cared* more for *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* than for *Homo Sapiens Supremis*. But he didn't. Blood is thicker than water, as the insightful old phrase went.

Pushing away the sudden return of his dark thoughts, Jim Caultron couldn't help but laugh together with Karalyn as he described some of his strangest experiences, and she described some of her more infamous adventures. Alien or not, she was a charming dinner companion.

She won the impromptu contest of humorous episodes in their lives when she described a recent prank where she'd flown up to the Sea of Tranquility to retrieve the lunar Lander named Eagle as a birthday present for President Bill Clinton. Unfortunately, she'd chosen the wrong time to deposit it on the White House lawn and had discovered the President hiding in the White House bushes with a girl nearly as young as she was. They were fully engaged in some truly Presidential intercourse.

Unsure of what to do as she stood with that ancient Lander on her back, neither of the erstwhile lovers aware of her presence. She finally set the lander down and walked over to introduce herself to the President and his young lady. A dozen Secret Service agents came out of nowhere to tackle her a few feet in front of the President, who stared at her in shock. Not to mention the young intern who was trying to cover herself up. Karalyn's pornographic account of her bird's eye view of Clinton's "Presidential Powers" kept Jim laughing until his sides hurt.

She went on to talk about the more pristine wonders of walking barefoot on the Moon. She tried to describe to Jim how it felt to fly through the corona of the sun and about how cool it was to play hopscotch with the zillions of rocks that formed the Rings of Saturn. She talked about skinny dipping in the boiling acid lakes of Venus and hitching a ride on a comet and walking on the rocky core of Jupiter with a thousand atmospheres of pressure squeezing her body. She waxed enthusiastically about her escapades until Jim decided to bring her back to Earth by massaging her bare feet.

Karalyn sighed in contentment and slipped low on the couch as Jim exercised his practiced touch at Chinese foot massage. The fact that this Girl of Steel from the deep-dark depths of outer space liked to have her feet rubbed was what finally convinced him that she was just as human as he was. But unfortunately a Velorian. The blonde face of mankind's ultimate Enemy.

Thursday, 8:25am – The morning of the Test

Walking around the end of the sandbagged revetment as he pushed away the memories of last night, Jim couldn't help but smile at her as she leaned casually against the shooting backstop.

She saw him and gave him a hesitant smile and a quick thumbs up in return. Despite her confident gesture, Jim thought she looked nervous. Glancing to the side to see all the weaponry that was aimed at her, he could easily understand why. This morning's test was Karalyn's final exam, her graduation if you will from

the countless tests that the government had put her through during the last few months.

Thinking back to the warmth and passion of last night's meeting with her, it suddenly seemed completely bizarre that he was about to do everything in his power to injure her. He shook off the growing sense of guilt that had consumed him since awakening this morning, especially the guilt that came from the knowledge that the ultimate measure of his success would be this young woman's death.

But not today. He was going to fail. She was invulnerable. For the first time in his life, he wanted to fail the test.

Yet he had to try. To learn. To adapt their weapons to find her weakness.

Such was the desperate nature of the government anti-alien program in October of 1999. Caultron had studied Karalyn Jones' growing dossier a hundred times in the last few months,. He'd learned that she was a senior at Oceanside High School in LA and that her days were filled with the same activities that occupied any other smart, pretty girl in an American high school. Karalyn was a good student, she held an A- average, and she was a member of the Student Council. She was a member of the girl's dive team and the school's top gymnast, although she hadn't made it to State in either of those sports, obviously because she had held herself back in fairness to the other girls. She was 5'10" tall and weighed a very slender 111 pounds. Her long hair was sunshine blonde and she was stunningly blue-eyed, her skin as uniformly tanned as any other outdoor girl in sunny LA. More than just pretty, her body was seemingly perfect with not a single blemish visible on her skin, her complexion as colorful as a woman wearing the most artfully applied cosmetics. Yet for all that, he doubted that even the most skillful artist could imagine a more perfect picture of a goddess than Karalyn Jones. The Archives had suggested that the Supremis were the deliberate creation of something called a Galen. Their god, he wondered?

In contradiction to the arrogance and self-indulgence that so often came packaged with such stunning beauty, Karalyn Jones was the most ordinary and

approachable of girls. She had no trace of the extreme ego that a young and beautiful Goddess could be excused for having. Instead, she was self-effacing and outgoing, often volunteering at a homeless shelter in downtown Riverside. There she served food to the gray men and women of the streets while sharing her rare beauty and some of her remarkable energy with them, her bright eyes and glowing hair a beacon of bright promise among those who had given up all hope. She was also a Big Sister to some girls down in Watts who lived in foster homes while waiting to be adopted, for Karalyn knew about the mixture of hope and despair that every girl in an orphanage felt. She herself was the adopted daughter of Dan and Carol Jones, the family living at 1223 Onyx Lane in Oceanside, California.

Her bio said that she had an older brother and a younger sister, Allan and Jennifer, step-siblings really, both of them completely normal kids other than the fact that they'd grown up living in the next room to a girl who'd been born on a distant star. A girl who'd stunned them all at the age of five when she lifted the front-end of the family's Toyota Landcruiser over her head in the Mojave Desert after Dan Jones had made the near fatal error of leaving the truck's spare tire at home. She'd wound up flying their Landcruiser home with the family holding on for dear life. Her dad had quickly awarded her an honorary flying license even as he and Carol worked harder than ever to keep her feet planted firmly on the ground.

Jim had chuckled out loud as he'd read some subsequent reports about the Jones' family annual outings. It seemed that each year, the goal at the summer family outing was to challenge Karalyn's strength and skill, a tradition that apparently went back to when she was only six years old. The whole family, aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins, got into it each year with the trophy going to any person who could come up with a feat that Karalyn couldn't accomplish exactly as prescribed. Few trophies had been given out since Karalyn turned twelve and her ultimate powers manifested themselves.

He paused as he smiled at the memory of the clandestine video that the FBI had made of last summer's family gathering.

Chapter One, Part Two – Invulnerability

Once he'd started on the project, Caultron had found himself astounded and sometimes immensely amused by the video and other personal anecdotes that he'd found in the FBI surveillance reports. The high technology video and audio coverage from their covert surveillance often picked up every image and nearly every word of life in the Jones household.

He learned that Karalyn had been going steady with a boy named Keith Edwards for the last year. He also found that she'd never gotten into any real trouble and the only blemish on her record was when she'd lost her driver's license a month earlier. She'd been clocked on radar while driving greater than 190 mph across the desert in Cousin Phil's new Volkswagen Beetle no less. Smiling, he realized that Karalyn had obviously been showing off more than her driving ability to her white-knuckled cousin – a Volkswagen could not exceed 100mph and the wheels would come off a long time before reaching 190. In fact, her right hand had gripped the central frame section of the VW to carry it along, its wheels never touching the ground. That led to some interesting forensics on the crushed metal.

Chuckling at that thought, he studied the immense collection of pictures in her dossier. They revealed an unusually pretty girl, her fine, blonde hair spilling over tanned bare shoulders that looked surprisingly strong given her very slim overall build. Her widely-spaced blue eyes sparkling with alertness and intelligence. The recent pictures of her in a tiny bikini were nearly scandalous, especially now that her figure had matured. Smiling to himself, he realized that she was the ultimate girl from LA: a pretty blonde who sometimes wore little more than a suntan and the sand between her toes, a girl who could play down and

dirty football with the guys one moment and then dazzle them with her graceful beauty the next. A girl of a thousand dreams.

The background report on her had turned out to be unusually detailed in other areas as well. Jim found that Karalyn had two e-mail accounts on the Web, both pseudonymous. She sometimes used the name KaraZ, a likely reference to an old comic book character named Kara Zor-El. The other name she used was probably even more appropriate for a girl of the 90's. Ubergirl. Reaching the end of the FBI's report, Jim put it back in his safe while removing the highly classified study the Defense Intelligence Agency had put together on her.

Breaking the encryption seal, he found himself reading a translated Arion document. It claimed that Karalyn's real name was Kara'lyn Zena'fal and that her mother's name had been Kara'sar Zena'fal. Her father was unknown. The report revealed the amazing fact that her mother had been born on a planet named Velor which was supposedly located either in another dimension or a few thousand light-years away — the DIA's interpretation of the Arion documents were hazy and conflicting in this area. According to the report, her birth mother was a member of a race of artificially-created genetically-engineered super-beings who called themselves Protectors.

Jim felt as if he was reading a comic book as the report described how her mother had supposedly died in a battle in yet another dimension back in the mid-80's while protecting some distant world. The details were sketchy at best, but they were amazing details nonetheless. He finally reached the last page of Karalyn Jones' thick dossier to read the DIA's conclusion. It read like a page from a Science Fiction fantasy:

"May 10,1999: Kara'lyn Zena'fal, aka Karalyn Jones, is the only known member on Earth from a humanoid race called Homo Sapiens Supremis. She is by birth and genetics a member of a branch called Protectors. They appear to be part of a rebel movement that travels the galaxy to stop their foe, the Arion Empire, from conquering human-populated planets.

Karalyn Jones herself has grown up on Earth believing that her unique powers are some kind of mutation. At the time of this writing, she remains

unaware of her true background. Her powers appear to be primarily physical in origin, for she displays tremendous muscular expansion when exerting herself and as a result has greatly enhanced strength (perhaps several thousands times that of human-normal). She should be considered extremely dangerous if engaged in battle. Yet based on the Roswell Archives and her actions to date, her intentions and those of other Velorians should be considered peaceful and protective.

It is recommended that Kara'lyn Zena'fal be recruited and trained by the DIA to oppose the arrival of the Arion Empire as was predicted in the Roswell Archives for the year 2005. Until that time, it is essential that she remain surrounded by as many supportive humans as possible to ensure that she remains emotionally attached to Homo Sapiens Sapiens."

Putting the red-bordered document down, Jim's imagination began to soar as he considered the implications of an advanced alien living on Earth. His mind flicked across scene after scene from various alien invasion movies. None of them had been remotely similar to the reality of Karalyn Jones' arrival, the closest one being an old movie about a comic character named Supergirl. On the other hand, the reference to an invasion fleet on its way to Earth made him think of movies like *Fourth of July*, which was unnerving to say the least. He eventually set the DIA report down while unsealing a more recent FBI update on her:

"September 23, 1999: Kara'lyn Zena'fal's full abilities are still unknown, but covert surveillance has observed her lifting objects that weigh in excess of two-thousand metric tons, apparently without difficulty. She also appears to have great resistance to injury and her skin has been shown to be invulnerable to penetration by military anti-armor or combat lasers. She has proven to be capable of unassisted flight at speeds greater than Mach five, yet the power for such levitation is unknown to either her or the research team. The consensus is that she is channeling of energies that are developed during muscular contraction, but the mechanism is unknown.

She can also project beams of coherent light from her eyes, the power greater than any military laser known today – estimates place the power of each

eye in the ten megawatt range. She also has shown evidence of unusually sensitive powers of sight and hearing, particularly the ability to see through solid objects and to listen to conversations that are taking place a half mile away from her.

Conclusion: Karalyn Zena'fal's unique abilities and appearance are completely consistent with the documented abilities of a Velorian in the Roswell Archives. It is therefore the conclusion of this report that Kara'lyn Zena'fal is a Velorian and care should be taken not to underestimate her abilities based on her youthful appearance and actions."

Jim was truly intrigued now. He began reading additional reports about the Velorian race, all of them coming from computer records which had been salvaged from an Arion spacecraft that had crashed in Roswell in the early 1950's and another that had crashed in Arizona in the early 70's. The DIA knew a great deal about Velorians and their cousins the Arions. He learned that while members of both those groups were in fact born to the *Homo Sapiens Supremis* race, the political and social objectives of the Empire Loyalists and the Velorian Enlightenment were totally different.

Jim also learned that they DIA had obtained a copy of something called *The Arion Plan of Conquest, Sol System*. It was clear from that document that the Arions intended on eventually bringing the Earth into the sphere of their vast Empire. Why they hadn't done it already was a mystery, although there were veiled references to upsetting another group of people called Ancient Ones. Apparently the Ancient Ones has a special interest in Earth remaining unspoiled and isolated. That and talk about a Protector, who presumably was a different Velorian than Karalyn.

If this Plan of Conquest was indeed real, then the Arions had concluded that the Ancient Ones were no longer around. That thought made Jim think of the 'god is dead' debate that had occurred in the popular press on Earth a decade before. Perhaps 'God' had protected the Earth once upon a time. He found himself wondering if Karalyn Jones was an angel, sent here to do God's work by protecting the planet?

It was all very disquieting, so much so that Jim hadn't had a good night's sleep since reading the Archives. It wasn't just the realization that Earth was no longer alone in the universe, he'd long been prepared to accept that. Instead, he was terrified by the concept that a race of militant super-beings was intent on bringing it into their Empire by violent force of arms. Earth's apparent special status was about to end.

He started to search for the clues as to how the government planned to stop the Arions. He was quickly astounded to find that the DIA had concluded that this girl named Karalyn Jones was the only thing that stood between the Earth and total destruction. Looking back and forth between the pictures of the hulking Arion soldiers and at Karalyn's pictures, he found it incomprehensible that this slender, young and naive girl was to be their savior. It was completely insane. It was like having Allie McBeal take on Darth Vader and a regiment of Storm Troopers with only her bare fists, her cute smile and her lawyer's briefcase. It was incomprehensible to him that the U.S. Government, an organization whose paranoia was legendary, would put all its faith in this slip of a girl.

He was especially skeptical of the DIA's conclusion that a *Homo Sapiens Supremis* like Karalyn Jones was completely invulnerable to any form of harm. He knew from long experience that every person and every system had a vulnerability, and this young Goddess from the stars was no different. He had only to find the key to her undoing and then exploit it.

He had since pledged himself to learning everything he could about Karalyn Jones' weaknesses. His first step was to activate the team of anti-armor experts that he'd worked with for three decades. His second step was to arrange a face to face meeting with her. That request had led to last night's meeting in the lobby of the old Stentorian Lodge.

Thursday, 8:35am

Blinking his eyes again, Jim brought his thoughts back again to the weapons test laboratory that he stood in. It was five minutes past starting time and the President hadn't arrived yet.

He lit another cigarette as he thought back to the government plan to teach Karalyn how to use her native abilities to protect the Earth. It had been a lofty goal for a bunch of Terran scientists to pledge themselves to, a goal that seemed to be better placed in the comic books that Karalyn liked to read than in a top-secret government lab. But the scientists had done their best and it was no longer uncommon to see a Supergirl comic book or two laying around their offices. They claimed they were just doing research.

Jim had decided on a very different plan for Karalyn than the ones the other agencies had tried, for he was far more interested in finding a way around the invulnerable "*armor*" of a Supremis than in teaching a teenage girl to fight with her fists. He knew that if he could make a weapon that would stop this girl, then he could manufacture thousands of them in the coming years and equip the military to turn back the coming Arion invasion.

Neither the CIA or DIA had made a convincing case about whether Karalyn Jones was an internal security issue that the FBI should handle or a threat from outside the country that should be left to the DIA or even CIA. Was she an alien weapon system or a naturalized citizen of the USA? Despite the protocols that had been developed after the Roswell Incident, nobody really knew how to handle a high school girl from Oceanview who was arguable one of "THEM." It had finally taken a Presidential Order to form the multi-agency group that Jim Caultron had been brought in to lead.

It was called Project Earthly Supremacy.

Agents from the DIA had quickly busied themselves trying to teach Karalyn to use the full extent of her powers. Unfortunately, like everyone else who'd tried to control her, Karalyn paid them little attention. She was determined to live her life the same way she'd been living it before the government arrived and she could escape their clutches anytime she wished. Given that she was sixteen and involved in a host of school activities, she had little time for what she called her

Men in Black, the name coming from a recent movie that Karalyn had found immensely amusing. Amusing herself further, she'd dressed in a bug costume and green makeup for her first meeting with the President of the US. The men in black suits hadn't thought that was funny at all, especially the way the President had spent most of the meeting staring at her bare legs. Karalyn Jones had very nice legs.

Still, she tried to be cooperative whenever she could stop giggling long enough to get serious. She'd recently started giving up her Sundays to go through the government testing program and had completed every test now except this last one. All they had to reward their best efforts was a slightly bored girl from LA and a lot of worn-out and burned-up weapons. Which was why they'd finally brought Jim Caultron and his team in. He was an expert in finding the weakness in any type of armor.

To make matters worse, Karalyn had recently refused to participate in any more tests. Flying back to LA under her own power, she'd since become adept at avoiding her Men in Black.

Taking advantage of the unplanned pause in her training, Jim had studied the videos of her earlier testing, much of it conducted in the Nevada desert, some of it at Camp Pendleton near LA.

He'd started his research with a video from the Marines that showed Karalyn sitting nude in a crater on a sandy beach after deflecting the most powerful anti-armor weapons in the US inventory with nothing more than her bare skin. She looked so young and innocent, her hair casually braided, her slender figure hardly what he would have imagined given the reports of her lifting thousands of tons over her head.

Jim was further startled to see the high speed video of her standing in the desert as an Abrams M1A1 tank blasted away at her with sabot and HEAT rounds. He was fascinated by the ultra-slow motion image of a hypersonic sabot round, one that could penetrate the heaviest armor on earth, as it slowly impacted the exact center of her left breast. Her soft flesh dimpled deeply until

the hard ceramic-steel round met something even harder than it was, that being her ultra-toned pectoral muscle.

Her breast was flattened against her chest as the projectile instantly vaporized into a million molten streamers that left her body glowing white-hot for a few moments. He watched the tape in awe as the equally amazed soldiers did that to her another dozen times, almost as if they didn't believe their own cameras. By the end of the long test, Karalyn's breast looked engorged as her body glowed cherry-red from her waist upward. But through it all, she'd remained standing motionless with her hands on her hips.

In Jim's mind, the Marines had been totally out of line by asking her to go through their battery of tests in the nude, but the Marines were like that. They took an inordinate number of measurements of her body before and after shooting at her. As a result, they were the ones who discovered the relationship between a Velorian's breast size and the amount of energy she'd absorbed.

The Air Force had done their part next. Jim studied more pictures of Karalyn basking comfortably in an inferno of napalm while scooping the burning gasoline gel over her body, acting for all the world as if that deadly flaming gel was some kind of cosmetic mud bath. Their biggest explosive bombs had merely messed her hair up. Their fastest jet hadn't challenged her power of flight. She'd even grabbed a Russian spy satellite from orbit and delivered it to their laboratories before she saw what they were going to do to it. Then she'd angered them by taking it back to put it more or less back into its original orbit. She finished by giving an Air Force General a sophomoric lecture about her being a citizen of the Earth, not of the United States.

NASA had done their part by putting her to work, for they were a practical bunch with a limited budget for space launches. They'd started off by having her retrieve that cute little robot which they'd sent to Mars. Rover was now happily buzzing around everyone's feet at the JPL facility in LA. They'd followed that up by excitedly asking her to bring back the old Apollo hardware from the Moon so they could see how it had aged. Both of which had so impressed NASA that they'd drawn up a contract for her to put the entire Friendship Space Station in

orbit. Unfortunately her Dad had said no, he didn't want Karalyn's presence revealed to the public, but NASA was still working on him under the guise of it being an international program for peace.

Yet in secret, Karalyn had already hoisted the largest part of the Friendship station onto her shoulders after the overweight module had proved to be too heavy for even the largest Russian launch vehicle to lift. She'd put the quarter million pound station into orbit. NASA engineers had been thrilled, especially after they'd gathered around her to watch the silent liftoff of their apartment building-sized space station. They seemed mesmerized by her power of flight.

The Army's simplistic approach to discovering her weaknesses was to try to blow her up with plastic explosives, including having her drink a vial of a new and incredibly powerful liquid explosive. The near nuclear burst in her tummy had turned the middle of her body white-hot for hours and had left her with a really bad case of gas and some killer heartburn. The nerve poisons they subsequently made her breathe had merely given her the hiccups. She'd finally scared the hell out of them by casually catching some of their artillery shells in mid-flight and returning them to their shooters. The frightened artillery men had made her disarm them by carrying them back out into the desert to explode them by smacking her fist against their nose fuses. The fact that she'd gripped them tightly between her bare legs while doing that had done more than simply impressed them, especially given how short that blue skirt of her uniform was. The inner glow of her thighs had disturbed everyone when she sat in the debriefing room afterward.

The General Services Administration had gone to work on her uniform as opposed to testing the girl who wore it. They borrowed her clothing for a week to try to figure out what it was made of. They'd come up short, for no matter how high they turned up their Scanning Electron Microscopes, they couldn't discern the secret of her metallic costume.

The Atomic Energy Commission had done their best, and they were clearly the best. Jim had been most impressed with the video coverage of Karalyn emerging from the radioactive hell of an underground nuclear test after

attempting to smother the explosive effect of a small weapon with her body. The resulting explosion had shaken the earth for a hundred miles in every direction as her attempt to contain the burst had only made it more powerful.



Her invulnerable silver outfit had unfortunately still been in the hands of the GSA at the time, so she emerged wearing her only her birthday suit, her skin darkly tanned from the nuclear burst, her eyes sparkling like the sun itself as sparks flashed between the nipples of her energy-engorged breasts. Karalyn Jones, of course, acted as if she was totally unimpressed by it all.

A soak in the Area 51 base pool cooled her body down enough so that she could slip into a long white gown that clung wetly to her body, her chest glowing from the effects of the nuke. The scientists sat across the pool from her temporarily radioactive body and debriefed her. She thrilled them by wading in the pool and talking about the sensations of being mere feet away from a nuclear burst. The heat, the pressure, the extreme radiation. How it hurt at first, and then felt good. Very good.

The film from that nuclear test helped Jim decided to take a completely different tact toward overcoming Karalyn's invulnerability. He'd gradually developed a hypothesis that said that multiple threats of different types might overwhelm her even though no single stressing force could hurt her. He'd studied the endless video tape which showed the way her body blunted the impact of bullets, especially the way the spent bullets simply plunked to the ground a few feet in front of her. He knew that the energy those bullets lost had to go somewhere, and that somewhere was into her body. Strangely, the rebound grew stronger as the impacts grew stronger, depending on where they struck. The softness of her breasts rebounded them with a hollow thud, yet hitting a flexed muscle sent the bullets zinging off with a sharp ping. He developed a theory that said her body adjusted itself to push back with the same force as the thing that impacted against her. Whether it was a .22 caliber bullet or the anti-tank sabot of an M1A1 tank, she deflected it with equal ease. Yet he couldn't explain why her skin felt so soft to the touch while remaining impenetrable. Her flesh seemingly only pushed back as hard as was required to prevent penetration.

Yet she could make herself very hard if she wanted to. One video showed her working hard to flex every muscle in her body as the Army fired an experimental rail gun at her. The half-pound steel and ceramic slugs were

traveling at Mach 10 when they hit her tensed stomach, and the resulting violence of sparks from the disintegrating slug temporarily blinded the researchers.

The result of all the observations was that Jim decided to eschew both the raw power of a tactical nuke or the precision of a shaped-charge explosive. He planned to take a more subtle approach. He wanted to explore what would happen if Karalyn's body was overwhelmed by having to deflect a large number of different kinds of projectiles while simultaneously absorbing a very great deal of thermal energy. His theory said that she couldn't resist both types of assault at the same time, especially after her body had adjusted to deflecting projectiles and then was overwhelmed by coherent light and extreme heat.

It was now the fateful morning of that test in the Avalon Laboratory and Jim was ready to put his hypotheses to the test. He glanced again at his watch as the time started to drag. The President's helicopter was allegedly still in flight.

"Are you ready, Karalyn?" Jim asked as his voice echoed down the long building.

Karalyn nodded silently as she placed her hands on tiny waist. Taking a deep breath to steel herself, she stared directly back into Jim's eyes as she saw the laser adjusting to the slight jiggle of the 'V' as her chest swelled slightly with her intake of breath. The look on her young face was a trusting and confident one, the kind of look that a daughter might give to her father. A trust that was betrayed by their activities of the last night.

He was a man who understood that the needs of the many were greater than the needs of the one, or so he whispered to himself over and over, especially after having carefully describing the risks to Karalyn only the night before.

It was only the memory of his sister-in-law's death, and his wife's disappearance, that kept him focused on his higher goal.

Saving humanity.

Chapter Two - Part One - Vulnerability

The night before the test, 10:55pm - The Old Virginian Lodge

“So, tell me about the little horrors you have planned for me tomorrow,” Karalyn had said as she sunk into the overstuffed sofa in the Fireplace Room at the old lodge.

“I had planned to surprise you,” Jim deadpanned as he looked over at the beautiful blonde teenager who’d slumped beside him. Everyone in the room would assume they were father and daughter. “You like surprises, right?”

“Well, a girl has to know what to wear. Is this more underground stuff? Bombs? Guns?”

“No explosives, well except for the M23. Firing range. Indoors.”

“So I gather expensive clothing would be a waste of money. Just my uniform.”

Jim nodded, momentarily envisioning Karalyn without any clothing, and then in her tiny uniform. Remembering her age, he quickly suppressed that thought.

“What we have in mind is to rapid-fire a large number of different weights and velocities of projectiles at you. We know that your skin can deflect those, but my theory says that as your body adjusts to absorbing that kind of energy that you might become more vulnerable than usual to coherent ultraviolet light.”

“I doubt it,” Karalyn shrugged. Those guys in Nevada already tried everything. The only thing that impressed me was that small nuke – it sunburned the inside of my legs and toasted my you know what.”

“Don’t tell me...” Jim’s voice trailed off as he looked down at Karalyn’s long legs. “That burst was a violation of the nuclear testing treaty in any case.”

“Yeah, but they buried me deep enough to hide it. They told me to try and stop the detonation. Part of the test, I guess.”

"I don't understand. There is only one way to stop a nuke. Interrupt the firing sequence."

"Right. The scientists said that if I deformed a nuclear weapon enough, the trigger would be compromised and it wouldn't go off."

"And?"

"Didn't work. I tried to crush the thing in half with my legs, but that didn't deform the trigger enough. It still yielded pretty much as designed, nearly fifty kilotons, except that my body was wrapped around it. Big mistake."

Jim nodded, remembering the whispered rumors he'd heard. He was surprised at how comfortable Karalyn was with using the jargon of the weapon's industry. "Kilotons, huh? I heard that you hung around the Base pool for half a day afterward."

"Had to cool off and get some moisture back into my body. This kid's not completely unhurt, despite all those glowing government reports to the contrary."

"Well, you're safe enough from me on that account."

"No nukes in New Jersey, huh?" Karalyn smiled.

"Nope. This state has some silly little rules about that," Jim chuckled. "Unlike Nevada, filling out the forms to get a license to transport one of those things in your pickup is a real pain."

"I could see that?" Karalyn laughed. "The ATF would freak."

"Actually, what I've been doing is focusing in on the Arion research into lasers that we recovered in Roswell. We now have a new laser that operates purely in the short-wavelength ultraviolet area. Based on the Archive and some crude modeling based on all those tests we did on your body, my theory is that we can overwhelm your normal defenses and allow the heat of the laser to affect you in the unusual ways that were described in the Roswell Archive."

"What unusual ways?"

Jim looked at her for a long moment before answering, amazed that he was talking calmly about using a weapon on her that could turn heavy armor into

slag.” “I’m going to try to increase your internal body heat faster than you can convert it to orgone.”

“Internal heat? And how do you get heat inside me?”

Jim’s thoughts raced excitedly. He’d studied one report from Roswell a hundred times. The Archive had talked about a concept called “disabling libidinous arousal.” Intrigued in more than one way, Jim had gone back to the original archives and read up on it himself. The Arions talked about the way that thermal stress could be used to induce an uncontrolled state of physical arousal. The theory was that it could be used to turn the immense power of a Velorian’s body inward. Literally and figuratively.

Karalyn simply shrugged as she watched Jim’s eyes grow distant, unfocused. “Would it change your mind to tell you that I’ve flown beneath the surface of the sun, Jim. There’s a lot of ultraviolet light in the sun’s corona, not to mention a lot of heat. In fact, I did that a few days ago just to get the tan that I have now.”

She slid the sleeve of her sweater upward, proudly showed him her tanned arm. Her skin was absolutely flawless, almost glowing. He touched her hand, and she gripped his back, giving him a little squeeze as she sensed his thoughts.

“I can also crush the hardest steel with the fingers I’m holding you with, Jim, even squeeze it until the internal friction of the steel turns it molten hot. So I’m not sure what good bullets are going to do against me. I’m super strong everywhere.” She paused as he glanced furtively down at her lap then quickly back up into her eyes. “Yes, everywhere,” she whispered his unasked question, and then giggled and blushed.

Jim gulped as she picked up on his errant thought. He unconsciously gripped her hand even harder, his thoughts racing through fields of thought that were inappropriate considering Karalyn’s tender age. She acknowledged his little challenge by tightening her grip just to the point where he took an involuntary breath of pain. Her hand, which had felt so small and delicate only a moment before, now felt like a steel band closing around his.

“Ouch!”

“Sorry...” Karalyn said as she relaxed her grip. “Just helping to keep you grounded. Men have big imaginations, if you know what I mean.”

Jim pulled his hand back to massage some circulation back into it. “But heat isn’t the real deal, Karalyn. It’s the combination of stresses that we think will overwhelm your defenses and cause your body to become hormonally confused. Anyway, it’s just a theory I have. We’ll know for sure tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” she shrugged casually. “I mean, if you want to waste all those bullets and laser stuff blasting my bod, then be my guest. Most of them just tickle. And as far as lasers go, the energy just makes me feel kind of tingly and good inside and, you know, kind of, ah, excited. I mean, like really.” She paused to stare meaningfully into his eyes, hoping he knew what she was talking about.

Jim did, although he barely trusted himself to acknowledge that he did.

“Although I have to say that asking me to expose myself to a room full of grown men while you blast me with some kind of super-laser is just a wee bit kinky. Even for a Vel, especially someone you hardly...”

“What are you talking about...?” Jim interrupted her sharply as he found himself blushing brightly.

“I saw the working sketches in your briefcase, Jim. I can see through things. Remember?”

Jim squirmed uncomfortably and blushed as he recalled what he’d drawn in a moment of musing reflection. In his sketch, Karalyn’s legs were open and the laser was shining inward, between them.

“What was that Arion term,” Karalyn continued, her eyes flashing with amusement at his obvious embarrassment. “Oh, yeah. Ples’tathy, I think that’s what they called it. Some kind of endless orgasm that is stimulated by...”

“My notes and drawings are none of your business,” Jim protested, an edge in his voice.

“I’m always reading stuff that people carry around in their bags or notebooks, Jim. From what I saw in yours, I can only conclude that you think my vagina is my weak spot. Typical for a man.”

Jim paused to choose his next words carefully.

She shrugged. "Or maybe you're just wishing it is. A sexual fantasy. Right?"

Jim took a long breath and let it out slowly. "Actually, the Arion records had many references to extreme arousal as part of the way of defeating a Velorian. So we figured that they must be exploiting a weakness. The whole thing was related to that Ples'tathy thing. Which we don't think is an Arion word, by the way. Probably Velorian from what I..."

"So you decided to, to, I don't know what to even call it, rape me or something with that laser without my knowing about it?" she said as she interrupted him again. "Without asking permission?" Her eyes were flashing angrily now.

"How could we ask permission for such a thing?" Jim replied straight faced as he sensed she was toying with him. "I mean, the standard government forms alone would take an act of Congress to draw up. EEO and Environmental Health and Safety not to mention an OK from your family GYN would have been hell to get. I can see the request now: 'Procedure involves intense genital stimulation by ultraviolet lasing and high-powered projectiles leading to permanent and disabling libidinous spasm leading to multiple orgasms and subsequent unconsciousness'."

Karalyn stared at Jim in shock, her eyes opening wide. "Holy shit! That's what you're planning on doing?"

"No. The Testing Committee rejected the concept."

"You've gotta be shitting me? A bunch of people know about this demented idea of yours?"

"This project does have the highest visibility," Jim continued, not longer sure who was joking with whom. "All the way up the President himself. The man with ultimate power."

"You mean..." Karalyn's voice faded as she imagined the President staring at her as she paraded around in the nude, thinking his lecherous thoughts. She laughed outrageously. "Ultimate power, my ass. And no, that wouldn't work either."

Jim blushed again.

“Besides,” he continued, trying to keep a straight face now. “I’d have to explain that exact procedure to your mom and get her permission. She might be an ordinary woman, but I’m not sure I’d leave her kitchen alive.”

Karalyn broke into giggles now as she saw the growing twinkle in his eyes. She knew he was pulling her leg, at least about the forms and the note from her doctor. She decided to return the favor. “I could tell you some stories, but I won’t. You know, about what happens to a speculum when I tense up a bit. Things like that.”

“That’s more than I really need to...” Jim started to protest.

“But I know you want to know,” she teased, enjoying his discomfort.

Jim said nothing.

She continued proudly. “I held it so tightly that the stainless started to bend. I concentrated even harder on those special muscles, really tightening up, and the part inside me started to get soft. I just kept concentrating until it melted and started to run down my legs. The poor GYN’s eyes got as big as saucers as I floated to my feet and scooped up that molten steel to spread it all over myself.”

“Showing off, huh?”

“Yeah. I was in a weird mood and sick of all their tests. My way of saying enough.”

“I don’t think that incident made it into the medical record.”

“That’s because the doc fainted and hit his head, causing a bit of amnesia.”

“Thank God,” Jim sighed, even as he wondered why she was telling him all this.

“And as far as my Mom’s permission goes, Jim, she’d indeed take you apart with her kitchen knives, and she hates violence.” Her eyes were blinking excitedly as she impetuously lowered Jim’s hand to her lap.

“You’re really that strong... down there?” Jim asked, suddenly feeling faint as his heart missed a few beats. He tried to imagine the kind of pressure it would take to liquefy steel from the heat of its own internal stresses. Unimaginable pressure.

She laughed. "I could tell more stories about that kind of thing, but I think I'd just embarrass and intimidate you. Weird things happen to me when I try to, you know, take things inside me."

Jim could only nod, his thoughts racing wildly.

"In fact, I'm guessing that might be the strongest part of me." She guided his hand deeper into her lap.

Jim took a deep breath as he looked over his shoulder to make no one was listening or watching. "Well, as I said," he continued, struggling to breathe, "the Arion documents seemed to suggest that sexual stimulation was the most effective way to attack you."

Karalyn smiled at him as she boldly guided his fingers the rest of the way to the center of her strength, pressing the rise of her pubic bone against his hand. "Well, as far as getting my attention goes, you can always give it another try." She paused for a long moment, tilting her head to the side as she looked curiously into his eyes. "And since when did you start to have dreams of violent sexual conquest of your patients?"

Jim's face grew redder for a brief moment, and then his lips curled into a smile. He started to laugh so hard that he could only talk in gasps as he flopped back into the couch beside her. "Well, given that my... previous 'patients' were ah, military tanks and... and underground command bunkers... oh Lord, I hope not. I'm not sure I want to get... that up close with... you know, an Abrams tank?" He was laughing so hard he couldn't breathe.

Karalyn bristled. She didn't find it funny to be compared to an ugly battle tank. She decided to tease him back in the bold and irreverent way of a teenage girl. To shock him. "So if your big thing is penetration of invulnerable things," Karalyn said, feeling silly for asking what was obviously a stupid question, "and since I'm totally invulnerable, and a pretty girl, you naturally want to penetrate me. Right?"

Jim's laugh froze in his throat as she threw her glowing hair to the side, her eyes flashing angrily.

"What do you mean?" he asked tightly.

"You want to fuck me, right?"

"Karalyn!" Jim gasped as his heart racing answered her. He glanced around to see if anyone had heard her. Everyone's head was in their newspapers.

"Don't worry. All the guys in school want to, so why not an older guy. I'm used to getting the looks, if you know what I mean." She giggled again. "But your fantasy is a good one. You want to blow me up. From inside. Boom."

"No. I mean, it isn't like that, it's just that. My interest is professional and very focused on..."

"Oh, bullshit," Karalyn interrupted, ignoring his protest. "I know that the thought of making it with me turns you on, and that's totally cool." She leaned closer, whispering in his ear. "You're kind of old, but we could still try it. I mean, if you really want."

Jim sat up straight on the couch. "I didn't suggest... I mean, you're in high school and I..."

"Actually, Jim," she interrupted again, trying to defuse his protest by focusing back on the Archives, "I read that we Supremis grow faster before we come of age, and much slower than human after. So I could be fifty for all you know."

"We have records of you since you were a baby. You know, after the investigation started after that swim meet."

"My point is that you shouldn't worry about my age," she shrugged. "I'm not a human. And more to the point of all this, I agree that the Archives have some weird stuff in them. I think the Arions have some macho sick fantasy of fucking us to death. They're real sickos you know. All of them."

Karalyn's coarse words totally stunned Jim. He'd hoped she hadn't picked up on that aspect of the Arion combat techniques from the archives. Perhaps she was more mature than he'd thought.

His body was tingling dangerously as he decided to play along. "Maybe," he nodded soberly as struggled to get his equilibrium back. "But I clearly gathered that they fantasize they'd win such a contest. You know, Ples'tathy and all."

Karalyn winked at him. "Talk about flying a bit too close to the flame."

"Why's that?" Jim asked.

“You obviously have no idea how physical I get when I’m, you know, at that... you know, place,” Karalyn said, her voice hardly more than a whisper now.

Jim tried to imagine, but failed. Karalyn looked so perfectly beautiful. Untouched by any man.

She continued. “But maybe that Ples’tathy thing is just the Galen’s way of preparing us for mating with them. Foreplay for a goddess.” She leaned closer to melt against his side, her fingers molding his over the hard rise of her pubic bone. “Maybe we’ll find out tomorrow, assuming that laser thingy of yours is powerful enough to impress a goddess.”

Jim began panting as he tried to ignore the warm glow that rose from beneath his hand. He struggled to pull his hand away, but Karalyn effortlessly resisted.

She felt his body warming, saw him rising, but she had no idea how to seduce an older man like this. She instinctively focused on her natural physical attributes. Jim’s eyes had made it clear that he liked what he saw. She let Jim’s hand go as she drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around them, hugging them to herself. She rested one cheek on her knee as she sideways at Jim.

“Well, if that’s what Ples’tathy is all about, Karalyn,” Jim continued talking, trying to stay focused, objective. “Then the Arions are seriously into feeding the fever, even embracing the sickness.”

Karalyn gave him a funny smile. “You probably know more about that than I do. It was only this year that I even found out that I was a Velorian and I’m trying to figure out how my body works as much as you guys are. But my gut tells me that those so-called combat techniques are just Arion sexual power fantasies. It must get very lonely in space.”

“Don’t be so sure. The Arions seem very deliberate and cautious in all other ways.”

“They are also men, most of them anyway. And they’re seriously hung up on that ‘vessels of the gods’ thing, and think they’re all gods. But they are right in one way. I’m convinced the correct interpretation of the archives says that my

people were created to ultimately mate with the Galen. To bear new gods from our wombs.”

Her simple statement rocked Jim back in his chair. He gasped at her boldness. “If those words came from anyone but you, Karalyn, they would be irresponsibly arrogant.”

“Just telling it like it is?” she said with a toss of her blonde hair. “Maybe I’m not a real goddess. A demi-goddess or something. Half human and half Galen.”

“Well, given your spectacular appearance and those powers of yours, you obviously weren’t engineered to work at McDonalds.” He paused for a moment before winking at her. “Seems to me that the gods must like cute blondes who can kick ass.”

“Does that include you, Jim. The part about cute blondes? Kicking ass?”

Jim smiled broadly at her. “Well, I’m certainly no god, that much is for damn sure. Just ask anyone.” He paused to gather his courage. “But, if, ah, but if you are asking me if I find you attractive, I can say in all honesty that I find you stunningly beautiful.”

He paused for a long moment after that frank admission, afraid to go on. He screwed up his courage. “But even more than that, your incredible physical abilities fascinate me, both professionally and very personally. I mean. it’s like this...”

“So, why didn’t you say so earlier?” Karalyn interrupted. “We’re perfect for each other then. You like strong women, and I’m the strongest girl alive. At least on your world.”

Jim was so stunned by the sudden leap of her logic that his power of coherent speech momentarily deserted him. “No... I mean yes, I mean I’m not interested in you that way. Only for my research,” he blurted out. “Besides, I’m hardly the man to...”

He was startled into silence as Karalyn rested her hand on his thigh and squeezed him. Almost painfully.

“Just simple research, huh? And that’s why you’re like totally turned on right now but don’t want to admit it.”

"I'm not..."

"Are you afraid of me, Jim Caultron?" she interrupted as was her style. "Afraid of getting physical with someone as strong as me."

"Afraid... no, it's not that... Ok, yes, but more its like you are way too young. I'm not some kind of dirty old man."

"Uh huh," Karalyn said slowly as she released him. Her eyes were sparkling as they looked into his, her pupils as bright a young child. "All men are, even if most won't admit it. But I can see through things, remember. I can see your desire rising, and I can even taste your hormones in the air just as you can sense mine, although you don't know it." She paused, wondering if she dared go on. She found she did dare. "You want me more than you've wanted anything in your life."

She paused as she impulsively placed his hand back in her lap, and felt his body stiffen as he resisted her. "But I think you're afraid that maybe I'm some kind of inviolate alien being who can't be satisfied by a mere man," she continued. "Especially an older man. You're envisioning that it would take Superman to really please me." She leaned closer to touch her lips to his ear. "Even more, my raw strength scares the hell out of you. I mean, I know what you guys imagine. I've read all the veiled speculations in the FBI reports. Heard all the jokes."

Jim threw his last effort into closing off his racing thoughts. He'd never felt more aroused. So overwhelmed that he chuckled. Overwhelmed by an intimate conversation with a precocious teenager?

"This is funny?" she asked with a toss of her blonde hair.

"Ok, Ok, no, I mean, my reaction is. Of course your strength is intimidating, but also wildly exciting. You are so healthy, so young, so pretty."

"This is bad?" She crossed her legs sexily, slender Velorian muscles flexing with feminine grace.

"No, it's very good. I just can't forget the calculations regarding how much force your legs could exert if they were wrapped around something." He paused

to swallow hard. "The number was in the high hundreds, and the units were tons."

She straightened one slender leg, lifting it to run her hands over her thigh. "So, you think I can't control my strength or something?"

"It would take only the tiniest tick of a muscle or a moment of enthusiasm and... hell, it could be pretty gruesome."

"Oh, instead of being mousy, now I'm gruesome am I. You certainly are a silver-tongued devil, Mr. Caultron."

Jim took a deep breath before he continued. "Karalyn, if you knew how much your strength turned me on, your beauty, then you'd know that I'm doing everything I can to keep our relationship proper. Some things are not meant to be, no matter how much either of us might want them."

Karalyn was suddenly serious. "What does proper mean when one of us is an alien? Do all those precious Terran rules apply to me? I think not. And since when do I have to wrap my legs around you to make love?"

Jim was suddenly reminded that despite the open nature of their discussion, Karalyn wasn't as experienced as she seemed. "Ah, well, I mean, getting enthusiastic in the throes of passion sort of comes with the territory. You've read Niven's work, I'm sure. The Man of Steel, Woman of Kleenex story? He talks of sexual orgasm being like an uncontrolled muscular spasm."

Karalyn giggled as her eyes lit up. "Yeah, I have read it, like a hundred times. Man, I gotta find that guy named Kal someday. Can you imagine how, ah, manly he must be? How strong? Trust me, the Man of Steel is my kind of man, that's for sure."

Jim couldn't help but laugh at the wistful look on Karalyn's face as his eyes smiled playfully back at hers. She was messing with him now, or so he hoped. "Ok, so you think need a guy that's got some super-duper gear in the worst way."

"Does that intimidate you?" she said as she traced her fingers over his. "That I'm super everywhere? Even, you know, down here?" She paused and took a breath, watching his face. Her spoken fantasy about Superman hadn't visibly intimidated him.

Jim felt a surge of desire that made hair feel like it was standing on end. He didn't even try to pull his hand back this time. Instead, he carefully considered his reply. "Well, maybe. A little. I mean, yeah. On the other hand, while younger men have got the gear and all, and they are physically more capable than us older men, we have experience and patience on our side. That's no contest in the eyes of most women."

He stopped as he heard himself rationalizing a reason for Karalyn to sleep with him. This was insane. "I mean, I guess I've never judged myself by the supposed prowess of another man, and I'm not about to start doing that now. Or fantasizing about it. And I'm definitely not equipped to compete with your fantasy Superman."

"Some people think I'm just a fantasy too."

"A few months ago I would have been one of them. Now I know that reality can be stranger than fiction."

"Ah, now I see that I've moved from mousy to gruesome to a strange fantasy. I guess I must be making great progress in your eyes."

Jim laughed as he saw the impish grin on her face. "There is indeed hope for you yet."

"So, what are you hoping for from me, Jim? Really. Is it sex?"

"No, not at all," he protested again, even as his visceral reaction to her words made him a liar. "I'm just puzzled by the multiple references in the Archive to arousal during battle. Sex and assault have only been associated with male rape of a female, and that's hardly loving. That's just a power trip and the ultimate form of assault against a woman."

Karalyn paused for a moment, her eyes telegraphing that she was tossing some kind of mental coin. It apparently landed heads up. "Maybe in my world it works the other way around. Maybe I'm the dangerous one. Maybe that's how I kill my enemies? Maybe my uncontrolled strength during intimacy is my ultimate weapon."

Jim was taken back by her words, even as he knew that she was guessing at what the Arion chronicles had meant. She knew so little about herself. "If so,

Karalyn, then the Velorian orgasm must be something beyond my imagination. I've read the account of the power a male Arion Prime possesses. It's just hard to imagine a young woman eclipsing that kind of power. Encouraging it even. Absorbing it."

Karalyn shrugged yet again. "I don't know about Primes, but I keep thinking back to the references to my people's prowess in battle as recorded in those Arion Archives. Death during orgasm is a recurring theme. The Arions seem to be drawn to the possibility of sexual combat. They talk of the glory of conquest, but also the honor that comes from losing a valiant fight. But perhaps they are the moth drawn to my flame of extinction."

Jim gasped. He'd guessed as much himself. "But maybe those words were just the fantasies of a lonely man in deep space too long. I mean, if even half of what I read is true, then there is no possibility of your having an ordinary relationship with a Terran man."

"Who said ordinary? And sure, I'm thousands and thousands of times stronger than any man, but I haven't hurt you so far. I have very good muscle control."

"Have you ever... you know..."

She shook her head, "Never. To my boyfriend's continual regret. And mine."

"A virgin who really doesn't want to be one," Jim mused.

"I don't want my first time to be in some sweaty back seat with a boy from school." She smiled brightly. "And if I can't have my Superman, then I want a man who knows everything about me, and who is experienced."

"Well, then at least I meet the middle criteria. I've studied every image or word written about you."

"And the last. How many women have you made love to?"

"I don't exactly keep score."

"Then guess."

Startled by her personal question, Jim ran through the list. The cheerleader in high school, the girls on port calls with the Navy, girls in college. He didn't list his wife. "Maybe ten or so."

“A real stud, huh? That makes you the right man for my little request.”

“Just a man who’s been around a bit. But that said, I still don’t know how you’d maintain fine muscle control during the...” He paused, embarrassed by his thoughts as he actively imagined Karalyn caught in the throes of passion. “I mean, sexual orgasm has been likened to an epileptic seizure that robs one of all their ability to control their strength. It’s also clear that the frantic Arion drive to achieve penetration would be lethal for a human female.”

“True. But, they couldn’t possibly hurt me that way,” Karalyn said proudly. “I think I would just, you know, dominate them or something. Drain their energies, orgasm after orgasm. You know, fuck them to death.”

Jim gasped at her crude words. Was she trying to shock him again? “That’s just my point,” Jim replied smoothly, not rising for the bait. “From what I’ve learned in the archives, some Arions could give the comic book Superman a run for his money. And you think you can control such a man?”

Karalyn nodded, her eyes bedroom large as they reflected the glow from the fire.

“Then the possibilities for mere Terran men begin to fade very rapidly.”

“You couldn’t fade away if you wanted to, Jim Caultron,” Karalyn said softly, “and I can be gentle. I think. Besides, it doesn’t have to be some big mystery. I’m sitting right here beside you. If you want to discover what a Velorian orgasm is like, if you want to know what sex with a Velorian is like, you have only to invite me to your room.”

Jim was stunned yet again by her frank speech and innocently provocative invitation. His thoughts raced even faster as he scrambled to keep up with her. “Yes, I am trying to understand you and no, that’s not something I ever planned to learn from you. Besides, we don’t think you can. Not in a normal way.”

“Have an orgasm?” Karalyn laughed heartily. “Then you don’t know me at all. Trust me, orgasms are just about my best thing.”

“No, not a simple orgasm, I mean ordinary sex.”

“Oh, and what’s so ordinary about sex? I think it would be wonderful. Especially with you.”

Jim closed his eyes as he desperately tried to block his erotic imagining of what Karalyn would be like in the throes of an orgasm. He forced himself to remember her age, and that helped him stay on topic. "Karalyn, ordinary sex means intercourse. We think that your body instinctively performs some kind of adaptation when it's under stress so that it can reflect or deflect or absorb or block anything that tries to injure you. How do we know that sexual penetration would be any different? Would your body fight back and keep you invulnerable, inviolate even? You might even do something dangerous to your lover."

"I don't know about dangerous," Karalyn shrugged her shoulders impatiently like the teenager she was. She felt herself becoming frustrated at Jim's reluctance to act. "But I agree that I might be too much of a challenge for an old fart like you who is hung up on being so proper. Hell, I'm not even human for god's sake."

Jim saw a hint of a tear formed in the corner of her eye.

"Hey, what's this 'not human' stuff?" he asked as he saw the tears. "You look so human it hurts."

"Hell if I am. Human women can't fly and melt stuff with a glance or crush steel with my, you know, inside strength and all that kind of jazz."

"O.K, so you have some unique talents." He winked at her.

"But also unique limits. An ordinary woman can do things I can't. Like having sex with any man they want to."

"Stop it!"

"Hey, I thought you older guys were supposed to worship teenage goddess like me or something? I've been told that lots of the soldiers who tested me have been fantasizing about discovering my hidden super-power. Super-sex or something."

"That's enough. More than enough. We'll have to continue our conversation later, when you're ready to get serious."

"But I am serious."

"Not about what we need to sort out here."

And that was that... for the time being.

* * *

"She's not really human," he heard a strong voice in the back of his head saying. *"The rules don't apply to her. Surely you know that."*

And it was as if he were with Karalyn again – alone this time.

Karalyn just smiled at him, her near nudity and her firming nipples clearly telegraphing her arousal now. "Don't go and get any of that gender stuff confused on me now, Mr. Caultron. The operative phrase is, 'Oh my Goddess.' Preferably shouted during passion."

"A super girl..." Jim said breathlessly as he lifted his hand to run his fingers down the smooth suppleness of her side, marveling at the softest skin he'd ever felt. He reverently traced his fingers downward across her thighs to caress firm muscles that he imagined had the power to move mountains.

"That's exactly what I am," Karalyn said as she proudly felt the way he was admiring her body, knowing how much her strength infatuated him. "I'm your personal Supergirl." She closed her eyes as she willed his hand to rise further to assuage the now burning arousal of her proud nipples. She was disappointed a moment later when he didn't respond.

"So, Mr. Caultron, are you really going to take me to your bed or simply lose me forever?" she said, parroting a line from an old movie she loved, *Top Gun*. Her voice was loud enough this time for half the room to hear, carrying as it did a hint of impatience.

Jim inhaled the wonderful scent of wildflowers and honey that surrounded her, and no longer had the willpower to say no. His body exploded into a thousand sparkles of arousal as she melted softly against his chest.

Karalyn smiled as she felt his hand rise to tentatively brush across her breast. She'd never seduced a man before, but she felt success at hand. She closed her eyes and murmured. "Oh, that feels so nice, Jim."

His hand became bolder at her words, closed to overflow with her softness. His heart leaped. "Oh, my Lord..." he whispered. "You're soft! How are you bulletproof?"

Karalyn leaned down to shower him with her silky hair, giving him a smoldering kiss beneath that golden cloud. Jim held her tightly, his fingers caressing her.

Their hearts began to beat as one as Karalyn lifted them both from the couch, floating as light as a feather. She hugged him tightly as they tried to make their way across the lobby, Jim's longer legs making their walk awkward at first. She let her feet lift a fraction of an inch from the floor to synchronize her movements with his.

They were moving like two dancers by the time they slipped through the closing doors and into a crowded elevator. A dozen eyes stared in shock at the tall, teenage girl, so stunningly blonde, as she kissed a man old enough to be her father. The other men felt an instinctive pang of jealousy, a memory of youthful pleasures long lost, while their wives flashed hot with anger at the young blonde's boldness. An instinctive fear stabbed at their hearts as they saw their husbands staring in rapt attention, eyes wide, their bodies stirring.

Fortunately, the two lovers slipped out the door when the car stopped on the tenth floor, their bodies moving so smoothly that they seemed to float down the hallway. The closing of the elevator doors abruptly ended the glowing perfection of what seemed like a glimpse into another world.

If they only knew.

Jim had eyes only for Karalyn as she used her slender strength to twist the handle off his locked door open, his card key still buried deeply in his pocket. They kissed again in the doorway, only to have Karalyn giggle and reach down to pick Jim up in her arms to carry him across the threshold.

"Velorians obviously have different customs," he chuckled as he felt her gently laying him on the bed.

"Obviously," she smiled sexily while straightening up to cup the remains of the steel door handle. She slowly formed it into a ball and then wrung it out like a wet sponge, knowing how much her fantastic strength would excite him. The tendons of her hands and wrist stood out like steel cables as the steel handle

gave off a keen, and then began to glow, finally escaping her hands. A white-hot rivulet traced the hard curves of her wrist.

She walked over by the window and shook her hands, a fireworks of glowing metal flying to send a hundred tiny plumes of smoke rising from the carpet. She placed her glowing hands over her chest, and her metallic uniform took on a brief glow as it absorbed the heat, her skin fading back to its usual tan in seconds. Karalyn was smiling softly as she floated silently off the floor, powered by the slight tensing of her long legs, and smoothly descended to straddle him on his back on the bed. She leaned forward to brush her long hair silkily across his body as she tightened her knees around his hips.

“Now that I have you firmly in the grasp of my strongest muscles, Mr. Jim Caultron,” she said as his hands rose to encircle the bareness of her tiny waist, “would you please do me the honor of undressing me the rest of the way.”

Jim thrilled to her bold invitation again as she straightened her back, her hair flowing so softly across her bare shoulders. Jim slowly lifted his hands, tracing them under her warm hair to search for a zipper.

She shivered delightfully from his touch, her lips curling into a smile in the way of an enthusiastic girl. She leaned forward to spill her soft hair over his shoulders, and thrilled as the touch of his fingers was now replaced by his lips. His kisses traced the side of her neck as his fingers traced down her silver uniform, finally discovering her waist again. They continued lower, finding the tanned perfection of her strong legs.

Their strong curves made Jim’s heart leap even stronger as he imagined the immense strength they contained. Turning his head to look down over her shoulder, he thrilled to the way her legs looked so impossibly long and so irresistibly erotic.

“God, you are so perfect, Karalyn. You are absolutely gorgeous... flawless... and so, so, SO impossibly strong...” His voice wandered away as he luxuriated in the sensation of touching the softest, silkiest skin in the world. Silk that covered the hardest steel in the universe.

“‘Engineered for total perfection’, or so your DIA records say.” There was a proud, breathless edge in Karalyn’s voice now.

Risking changing the mood, he still had to ask: “Does that bother you, Karalyn, knowing that you are not the product of a natural union? That your genes were artificially created and then grown in some laboratory to form you into some kind of super being.”

Karalyn heard the excitement in his voice even as she felt her own growing bubble of arousal fading slightly. Damn it, she didn’t want to think about that now.

“Yeah, it does,” she sighed as she rose from his lap to rotate in mid-air, slowly settling on her side beside him, her head propped up on her elbow, her golden hair covering the pillows. “A lot. I mean, how would you like to find out that you are some kind of super-duper soldier that somebody brewed up with their chemistry set from some alien recipe book. Someone whose genes were artificially tweaked so I could punch out super-powered aliens. Even worse, to be dropped on Earth as a baby without a clue as to what to do here. Other than the Arion reports, my uniform is my only link to home.” She closed her eyes as her voice became bitter. “And hell, I’m not even close to being human. Why am I on Earth?”

“Bullshit, Karalyn,” Jim said as he saw another tear forming in the corner of one eye. “You’re are human as anyone else. In your heart, where it counts.”

“Yeah, then how come I can do this?” she said as she lifted her hand to casually grip the brass banister. The tendons of her wrist stood out strongly as she tore off one end of the heavy banister off as if it was but soft clay. She lowered her hand to her mouth to take a big bite of the solid brass.

Jim just stared at her in shock as she began chewing the it like it was soft bubblegum, her pearly teeth working it hard for a few moments before she blew a great, big bubble of molten metal. She bit the bubble off with her teeth to proudly hold up what looked like a glowing Christmas ornament, and then swallowed hard to get rid of the remaining mouthful of molten brass.

“Jesus Christ...” was all Jim could say.

“No, the name is Karalyn Jones,” she said as the wide-eyed sparkle she saw in his eyes restored her sense of humor. “I thought we cleared that deity and gender thing up a while ago.” She winked at him as she casually used the fingernail of her pinky to flick an errant piece of brass from her teeth. “Besides, that little trick looks more impressive than it is. Just a parlor game I do to impress my younger cousins. But can anyone human do that?”

“Of course, Karalyn. I just saw you do it, didn’t I?”

Her smile lit up her face like a thousand watt bulb. “So,” she said with a hint of feminine challenge in her voice, “what would you normally do with a beautiful and willing woman who was lying half naked in your bed?”

Jim smiled at her girlish question. Karalyn was hardly a grown woman, but he found himself clinging to the rationalization that she wasn’t really human, despite his affirmations that she was. He felt his last vestiges of restraint evaporating. She was indeed an alien, someone outside the usual rules.

“Well, first I’d do something about her chronic problem with over dressing in funny costumes,” he said with a confident smile.

Karalyn giggled as she floated a few inches upward and wiggled her hips, helping him remove her silver uniform. His reverent touch sent tingles through her body, his fingers barely brushing her skin, and then his kisses warmed her as they grew more urgent, following the edge of the silvery fabric down her soft skin as she floated higher. She gasped in pleasure as his lips briefly brushed across her intimate center, so bare, his tongue tracing those fragrantly moist, musky nether lips, pausing to part her just enough to send a wild explosion of urgent tingles through her body. Wishing desperately that he’d pause there forever, that he’d become even bolder and deeper with his kisses, she was disappointed when he moved on, kissing his way down her long legs to her ankles. There he doubled the fabric of her bikini bottom around her ankles, tying them together tightly with the supposedly indestructible fabric.

“I’m told by our scientists that no force on Earth can tear this fabric,” he said, a suggestive, teasing note in his voice..

Karalyn smiled at his challenge. "Then it's a good thing these legs of mine weren't made on Earth," she replied as she luxuriated in his enthusiastic foot massage. She looked down to see the eagerness in his eyes as he stared up between her legs, his intensity making her shiver softly with excitement. He could see everything. "Do you like my legs?" she asked, knowing that wasn't the only thing he was admiring. Strangely, her lack of pubic hair made her feel deliciously naked. Like most Velorians, the only hair that grew on her body was on her head.

"I'm totally in love with them," he said reverently, softly kissing her ankle. Then her calf. Then her knee. She opened her knees as far as she could with her ankles tied, and he kissed further inward, finding her most delicate flesh again. His warm breath tantalized her as he blew gently between her nether lips. He traced his tongue around them, and she shivered in pleasure. She rewarded his kiss by tightening the powerful muscles that so infatuated him, a ripple of hard curves delicately reshaping her long legs, giving his fingers dozens of new curves to eagerly follow.

She tried to spread her legs, pouring uncounted tons of force into the effort. Yet the binding fabric of her panties merely stretched, containing her Velorian power. Jim felt her legs start to shake as she strained.

"Too strong even for you?" he asked breathlessly. He sounded disappointed despite his pounding heart. Rising to rest his hands on her feet, he watched the amazing display of muscle that reshaped her slender legs. "It is a totally invulnerable fabric after all."

"Nothing is completely invulnerable. Their testing tools just weren't strong enough," Karalyn answered as she bit her lip in concentration. "My legs are."

"Yet they are so slender." He rested his hands on her knees.

"All part of my grand deception," she said, biting her lips as she strained harder.

"I remember the report they wrote, Karalyn. They looped these panties around the hitches of two railroad locomotives and had those monsters try to back away from each other. I'm told that even with their diesel electrics roaring,

steel wheels spinning, they could barely stretch the fabric. That was only a single layer, Karalyn. Not the four layers that hold you now.”

“They were just machines,” Karalyn said with a depreciating toss of her hair. “Mere steel and diesels and electric motors. I’m flesh and blood.”

“They weighed two hundred tons, each with ten thousand horsepower.”

“Like I said, mere machines. I’m a Velorian.”

Jim laughed. “No problems with humility here. Care to prove it?”

“I’m trying, damn it,” she grunted as she floated up off the bed, straining, “but I need some inspiration.” She opened her knees as far as she could while turning in mid-air, and then settled gently over his shoulders to sit in his lap, facing him, her tied legs now encircling his waist. Her ankles were still bound behind him, and her arms rested gently on his shoulders.

“All you have to do is make me stronger, kind sir.”

Jim looked puzzled. “But... how?”

“Kiss me, you fool.”

He did. Her warm tongue met his aggressively, then passionately, Karalyn’s hungry enthusiasm startling him with her intensity. She took his hands in hers and guided them down to her legs, tracing his fingertips across her soft skin, letting him feel the underlying steel of her hard muscles.

Jim traced his fingertips slowly along the hard sinews of her thighs, sensing the immeasurable power of her young body, her perfection still more fantasy than reality to him. A riot of fantastic curves expanded to fill his hands as her thighs opened marginally, and her kisses grew almost frantic. He slipped his hand higher, finding her moist center, and slipped one finger inward, struggling to open her. Her soft breathing suddenly caught, and then a soft purring groan began deep in her throat as her legs began to shake from the strain of her exertions.

She gripped his finger with velvet steel. He struggled to curl his finger, searching for her G-spot. He succeeded in electing a sexy purr from her throat. The purr became a ragged gasp as he stroked his fingertip along the roof of her vagina, caressing her erotically with all his strength.

He was so lost in his intimate quest that he was stunned when a nearly deafening shrieking of tearing fabric filled the room. She screamed as he buried his finger even deeper in her, and her ankles exploded open, sending bits and pieces of metallic fabric flying like fragments from a grenade, tearing into the walls. Amazingly none of the fragments hit Jim.

“Oh my God, that was fucking hard!” Karalyn gasped as she collapsed backward on the bed, legs wide, her arms flopping at her side. “Had to be four thousand tons if it was an ounce!”

Jim looked at his wet finger. Her inner pinkness was now red and swollen. She reached up and pulled his hand to her, curling her lips around his finger to take it deeply into her mouth. She seemed anything but girlish as she liked it off.

“I think I taste wonderful. Don’t you?”

If she’d been any other woman, he would have taken her right then and there. Instead his head was racing as he tried to imagine the force she’d just exerted in those slender legs. He was frightened.

“Four thousand tons? Come on... even you aren’t that strong.”

Karalyn smiled as she reached up to wrap her arms around Jim’s neck as she gently pulled him down to lay on top of her. “I am when I’m tingly like this, babe.” Her lips melted into his as her soft kisses grew deep again, her tongue excitedly meeting his as the wonderful scent of an aroused man filled her senses.

He could taste her sex on her tongue. A touch of musk, but mostly she tasted like a delicate, fresh flower after a rainstorm, her scent so very different than any woman he’d known. Her lips were as freshly scented as a mountain stream flowing through a wildflower meadow. She kissed him so enthusiastically that he was soon gasping for air. Just when he thought he was going to pass out, she rolled him over on his back to bury him beneath a cloud of golden hair. Smiling as she took his hands in hers, she guided them upward across her shiny uniform until his hands were cupping her breasts. She closed her eyes and sighed as she found that her new fullness filled his hands to overflowing. She felt like a grown woman for the first time in her life.

"You are so, so beautiful," Jim gushed as his fingers began to trace her hard nipples, rising larger than any ordinary woman to greet his touch. The metal of her uniform top was cool to the touch, yet silky and sensual, the way it fit her body making it easy to imagine that she was made of that same metal. Jim's fingers slowly circled those steely nipples, coaxing that them even larger until he swore he could feel them vibrating softly beneath his fingers. "So fantastically strong. All of you. You truly are a Girl of Steel after all."

"That's me," she murmured as she luxuriated in his erotic touch. "I'm the girl with Tits of Steel."

Jim couldn't help but chuckle with her as she echoed one of the terms a young and obviously infatuated FBI agent had slipped into her records. Clearly he hadn't touched Karalyn, for only her nipples were steel-like.

Jim lay down beside her as she rolled over to face him, his hands moving on to trace the sculpted curves of her bare back as she opened her eyes to stare into his. He reached the curves of her ass, and cupped her tightly. Her eyelashes fluttered in pleasure.

She leaned down to brush her lips against his ear. "Buns of Steel too," she whispered. "Especially when I do this." She startled him by gripping his earlobe gently between her teeth as she slowly tightened her backside with every ounce of her phenomenal strength. The sensation of perfect roundness that filled Jim's hands was itself chased away as a millions pinpricks of pleasure assaulted him from her tongue, tracing slowly around the inside of his ear. After a long moment, he reluctantly traced his hands back upward, only to discover that a hundred more hard curves and steely clefts had appeared across her back.

"God, you have curves in places where other women don't even have places," he said in awe.

Karalyn responded to his thoughts by sitting back up to straddle him while tensing her arms and shoulders, posing as if a gym, her teenage body exploding into a tight maze of steely muscle. Jim caressed every hard muscle, finding that her slender body had lost all its softness now. He encircled the naked steel of her

remarkably large biceps as he lost himself in the erotic dream of unabashedly worshipping Karalyn's supreme strength.

Karalyn shared the ultimate dream of power with him, finding that she enjoyed being free from having to hide her special abilities, usually pretending to be weak and unassuming. Far from hiding herself now, she wanted Jim to exult in the full power of her body, and she was soon trembling from the strain of her extreme exertions. The worshipful trace of Jim's hands dwelled long on the rounded curves of biceps that seemed too large for her slender arms, and then descended to trace the steel-edged curves that now shaped her body. His lingering touch, returning again and again to encircle the rise of her biceps, told her that he was in love with her power, especially as he leaned forward to gently kiss each perfect mound. She proudly made her normally slender arms even bigger, so big that his hand could no longer surround those balls of steel.

"Undress me, Jim. The rest of me."

Jim reluctantly released her perfect biceps to begin fumbling with the clasp at the back of her uniform top.

"It doesn't open the way you'd think," she said softly.

"How so then?"

"Press on the back of the strap while running your finger around my neck. It's almost like you are asking it to open, coaxing it even. This fabric is alive, after all."

Jim was startled to feel the fabric shifting slightly beneath his hands as she spoke, almost as if her uniform was finding his touch as pleasant as Karalyn was. The idea of it being a sentient being both attracted and appalled him. He had an unpleasant image of finding a mouth and two eyes hidden in the garment.

Instead, he was distracted by two nipples that were now so firm that they dug painfully into his chest as she hugged him tightly. He struggled to stay focused on finding the small button on the back of her top. He ran his finger up and down the chain-like strap several times, caressing it until the fabric began moving beneath his fingers as if it was alive. The seam separated as if by magic, and the uniform began to remove itself from her. He had no time to ponder the

wonder of this symbiosis of a girl and her living clothing as the fabric began to move beneath his hands, feeling alive.

"I can't believe that this fabric is so nearly invulnerable, Karalyn," Jim said with a note of wonder in his voice as he looked down to see her torn bottom healing itself right before his eyes. "Even less that its alive. I mean, its almost diaphanous."

"Can you believe that the girl beneath is?" Karalyn asked as she tried to pull his attention back to herself. "Both alive and invulnerable." She lifted her top to reveal two perfectly rounded breasts, and then put her hands on her hips and tightened her phenomenally strong chest, Her breasts lifted even higher.

"Touch me."

Jim just stared, disbelieving her perfection.

"I'm not such a little girl after all, now am I?"

Jim answered her proud invitation by lifting his hands to gently cup her again, this time without the metallic fabric of her clothing between them. He was startled to find that her skin was as warm and soft as any woman he'd ever known, and that the resilience of her breasts was so very human, their expansive softness welcoming his deep touch as they overflowed his hands. He held her as tightly as he could.

Karalyn closed her eyes as she luxuriated to the feel of his hands, a million tiny tingles racing inward to her nipples as his thumbs circled them. They rose until they shocked Jim both with their phenomenal size, each of them as large as the first segment of Karalyn's thumb. Jim responded like the experienced man he was by taking one nipple between his lips, swirling the tip of his tongue. Karalyn gave him the encouragement of a pleasurable squeak as she wrapped her arms around his head to hold him to her breast.

A long minute later she leaned back, scooting over to sit on the edge of the bed. The look in her face was both needful and insecure at the same time. "Oh God, I don't want to hurt you, Jim. But I want you inside me so much."

"You won't," he gasped, so intoxicated on her beauty and her faint pheromones that he didn't care if he lived or died.

"I'm so much stronger than you are."

"We've already covered that, Karalyn. But you claim to have the self-control."

"But what if I forget?"

Jim felt a sliver of fear stabbing through his arousal, only to have another wave of passion crash over it as she buried his face between her breasts,

"Maybe I can just, you know, give you a blow job or something?" she offered.

"You wanted to explore new boundaries," Jim gasped as he struggled to breathe, astounded that he was talking her out of one of his favorite sexual acts.

"But I could do so many things that could hurt you. Like lose control of my eyes."

Jim lifted his head to gently kiss each eyelid. His heart was pounding. Karalyn had refused to demonstrate the powers that had been hinted at in the Arion chronicles. "They are so beautiful."

She opened her perfectly blue orbs to look deeply into his eyes. Their clarity was like that of a child. "An Arion would say 'so deadly.'"

"Can you really do what the Arions wrote? To project energy beams."

She nodded. "More powerful than any laser on Earth."

His heart leaped, daring to dream that he'd get a glimpse of something she thought too exotic to show anyone else. Despite the delicate moment, he gasped: "Show me."

She shook her head. "I didn't show the scientists any of that. Why should I show you?"

"Possibly because you're sitting naked on the edge of my bed. I think that gives me an inside track to your special talents."

Karalyn laughed like the girl she was. "Yeah, well maybe it does at that. You're really sure you want to see this?"

Jim nodded enthusiastically, his heart racing. He wanted to know everything there was to know about Karalyn. Not only for himself, but for that analytical being that was sitting in the back of his subconscious, taking notes. The one that was determined to save Earth from the aliens.

She knew nothing of that as she slowly turned her head to stare at the brass statuette on the table beside the bed. Two pale orange beams shot across the room, and a wave of shocking heat washing over him. He turned to see the brass glowing too brightly to look directly at. Blinking in the glare, he saw it slump as melted like ice cream in the sun .

“Jesus...” he gasped.

She smiled broadly as she turned her attention to a second statuette, making it glow as well. “That was just a tickle of heat. I could have vaporized it if I wanted, but that would have nuked you as well and burned down the Lodge.”

Jim had a sudden daring thought; without considering the consequences, he leaned over to stare into her eyes. A blinding heat scalded his face a millisecond before she blinked her eyes closed to send a riot of sparks exploding across her face. Behind him, the hot brass sagged further, the wood table smoking.

“Fuck!” She screamed as she blinked her eyes open to reveal her brilliant blue irises. “I almost took your head off, Jim. Don’t ever do that!”

“Just checking your reflexes.”

“And risked your life doing it,” she said angrily, blue eyes flashing angrily now.

“So, let me guess, you don’t need a microwave to make TV dinners?”

Karalyn took a deep breath, and then relaxed. A girlish giggle escaped her. “I once cooked a whole turkey. But it came out too tough to eat.”

“Still, you have cute eyes. I like the color blue.”

“Cute like a megawatt laser is cute.”

“No, cute like the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen.”

“Flattery could get you anywhere, Mr. Caultron. But you wouldn’t like the consequences.”

* * *

When Jim recovered from his erotic fantasy, he was torn between shame and dread – dread at what he must do next.

But when he actually met Karalyn again, he was ready to talk seriously.

“How about ending the threat of war forever?”

“Way too serious,” Karalyn said.

“But it’s what I’m working on here. And you can be a part of it.”

Chapter Two, Part Two – Vulnerability

Thursday, 8:49am –The Test

It was now hours later as Jim stood in the back of the firing range talking on the phone. He couldn’t forget having watched Karalyn pleasure herself, and how he had fantasized that they were truly lovers..

Yet despite all that, he found that his sense of duty had returned along with the vengeful heat he’d felt since his wife had died. Despite their closeness and frank discussions, he hadn’t forgotten that she was still an alien, and that her race was supremely dangerous to all human life.

In his world of weapons and forces and counter forces, no measure could lack a countermeasure. He still had to find Karalyn’s countermeasure.

The voice in his ear finally said that the VIP’s had arrived. Even though he couldn’t see through the dark glass behind him, he knew that the President and the Joint Chiefs were now staring down through the mirrored glass. Jim turned his back to them to look down range to see his young lover standing against the hardwood backstop, wearing her silvery uniform and looking bored in the spotlights. He felt almost schizophrenic as he smiled warmly at her, knowing he was about to do everything in his power to destroy her.

Sighing, Jim knew that the wonderful magic of Karalyn Jones was going change forever. Despite the way he felt about her as a man, and despite her sincere vow to save the Earth, he could not risk having her kind running loose and uncontrolled.

The hands of the clock ticked past the rescheduled start time: 0850.

Jim gritted his teeth and pushed the button which opened the doors behind him.

A dozen soldiers walked through it to man the waiting weapons. He heard the rapid click of safeties being removed and the soft clinks of metal straps being adjusted. The smell of gun oil grew stronger in the air as he looked downrange to see Karalyn's innocent blue eyes staring back at him.

"Ok, Karalyn, here we go. The total firing time will be less than five minutes. Are you ready?"

He put his hearing protectors and goggles on as Karalyn closed her eyes. She lowered her head and nodded, looking strangely nervous, and somehow more mature than she had last night.

Jim's eyes longingly traced every curve of her body for a final time...

"FIRE!" he said in a small voice.

The huge room was instantly filled with the roar and smoke of rifles and machine guns firing as Karalyn's body instantly disappeared beneath a riot of bright sparks and wood splinters and pinging ricochets as more than a hundred lethal rounds per second flew her way. The bullets cruelly impacted her slender form to smash her backward into the splintering hardwood wall.

Jim watched soberly as the sand-pit in front of Karalyn suddenly coming alive as hundreds of small craters formed across its surface. The bullets were rebounding from her body so fast that the sand looked like the surface of a pond during a sudden downpour. This was expected and was, in fact, the basis for Jim's theory of how to overcome a Supremis. He knew that each of those bullets was hitting Karalyn with many hundreds of foot-pounds of energy as her muscle tension adjusted to deflect the crumpled and flattened bullets so that they wouldn't hurt anyone else.

Staring at her through a pair of special goggles, Jim saw her flesh dimpling so fast that her breasts seemed to be undulating like things alive. The soldiers with the light weapons were aiming at her chest as they'd been instructed. The heavier weapons were pounding against her bare legs and lower body, each supersonic impact dimpling her soft skin before her invulnerable muscles stopped the bullet to send it flying backward. Her stomach was dancing like that

of a belly dancer when the Canadian hardwood that formed the wall behind her exploded from the bullets that missed her body.

The air was suddenly full of flying toothpicks, yet as instructed, she resisted the overwhelming urge to tense her body. It didn't take long before Karalyn's skin started to take on a reddish tinge, the wild energies of the impacts turning into heat as it transferred to her body. Her chest began to glow first, then her stomach, then her legs. Soon the entire front of her body was glowing cherry-red from heat that it would have dazzled Jim if not for his special goggles. She stumbled and fell to her knees, falling forward on elbows and knees as the bullets continued to bounce from her face and upper body.

He found he was holding his breath as the first of the soldiers ran out of bullets. It was time. He reached over to press the FIRE button on the combat laser. They flashed brilliantly to bath her body in heat,

The laser flashed brilliantly as it traced down her body, the tremendous heat melting the metal floor to liquid metal beneath her. She looked up at him, and tried to smile, letting him know she was O.K. She started to rise, slowly rocking herself back to sit in the glowing, molten metal.

Jim's heart was pounding and his mouth was dry as he forced himself forward, following the test plan he'd written weeks before. He keyed a command on his keyboard, and a far brighter flash made the room look like a photographic negative. Ten million watts of ultraviolet energy flashed across the room at the speed of light to impact directly on the red 'V' that still decorated her silvery uniform. Her chest flashed into blinding incandescence, the glow of her skin dazzling Jim's eyes even through his darkened glasses.

The super-conducting laser pulsed again and again as its searing beam traced a spiraling path downward from her breast and across her stomach to drop below her waistline. Jim directed the beam lower yet across her stomach to finally descend to the one place that the Archives said would disable her. A place that he had focused his lust on only hours before.

Ten million watts of coherent ultraviolet light began to strip away the bottom of her leotard to reveal the golden center of a true Girl of Steel. He pressed the

control to put the laser in over-pulse mode as the horrific beam raised her skin temperature to thousands of degrees centigrade. In so doing, the laser began to slowly unleash the uncontrolled libido of a being whose ultimate arousal came from the intimate absorption of energy.

Karalyn's high-pitched cry of pain/pleasure soon rose to echo down the firing range. Her beautiful cry of youthful passion slowly increased in volume until it forced the men to cover their ears to protect themselves as she slipped past the boundary of ordinary human pleasures and fell headlong into Ples'tathy – the uncontrolled orgasmic spasm that had been inserted into the genetic code of every Velorian woman. Every muscle in her body flexed with unrestrained power now as her blue eyes blazed with the heat of the sun. The twin beams from her eyes flashed around the room to melt a line across the heavy armored glass at the back of the range to send the VIP's diving for the floor. Her uncontrolled gaze touched the heavy M92 machine gun to obscure it in a shower of sparks as it sagged and then melted to slag.

Jim dove headlong for the safety of the floor a fraction of a second after the Marines did the same, barely avoiding as he did another of Karalyn's out-of-control eyes sliced the steel table next to him in half.

Meanwhile the UltLas continued to fire until Karalyn's lower body was glowing as brightly as the surface of the sun, the radiating heat blistering the paint on the remaining weapons at a distance of one-hundred yards as it forced the soldiers to hide behind the phone-booth-sized thermal screens that had been erected behind them.

Jim stared at Karalyn in astonishment from his hiding place under the table, his dark glasses filtering the glare just enough to reveal that she'd opened her legs wide to welcome the extreme power of the weapon so intimately inside herself. Her skin shimmered in shades of white to blue to yellow to red as the heat spread outward from the laser's focus. Her fine hair billowed about her head like a blond flame as the incandescent strands glowed the color of spun gold, and her impossibly alien loveliness lit the room.

Uncounted long minutes passed as the powerful UltLas held Karalyn in the heated grip of pleasure/pain that she had no ability to withstand for long. She lost all control of her powers as well as her thoughts and feelings as her body writhed and shook first with unrequited and then violently requited desires.

Her body burned through two meters of Canadian hardwood until her back was pressed against the thick battleship armor behind her. The steel which had protected the battleship North Carolina now met its match in the form of a pretty young girl from Velor, and began to melt and flow across her delicate-looking shoulders. A hundred brilliant rivulets of molten steel flowed down between her pert breasts to trace across her stomach only to be vaporized by the laser fire below. It flowed down her back at the same time to create a lake of bubbling slag at her feet.

All the while, Karalyn continued to sing her beautiful song of ecstasy as the unrelenting blast of the laser gave her no respite from her extreme arousal and the endless orgasm of her forced Ples'tathy. Her body shook and vibrated almost too fast to see as her hands served to pleasure her in ways that no man could now as she drew all the power into herself that the UltLas could generate in its over-pulse mode. More power than it had been designed to generate.

"Abort, ABORT," Jim screamed over Karalyn's frantic cries as he saw a wild flurry of sparks suddenly tracing across the outer casing of the weapon. By the time the closest Marine hit the STOP button, the short barrel of the UltLas was sagging from the heat and wisps of smoke were escaping from a dozen cracks in the weapon's metal casing. He stared at Karalyn as her youthful body finally slipped over the peak of her continuous orgasm and down the backside of a wave of pleasure that no Earthy woman had ever surfed. She slowly collapsed from the aftereffects of her extended orgasm as her quivering arms fell limp at her side and her chin slumped against her chest. She then slowly crumpled to fall face first into the sand pit.

The shooters now became firemen as they rushed forward to blast their way toward Karalyn with an array of CO2 fire extinguishers. The room was filled with their gray fog as they emptied all the extinguishers they had just to be able to

approach within a few yards of her glowing body. Even then, her skin temperature was still so high that they felt as if they were standing around an iron forge, the glowing metal that coated half her body making it look as if she'd been pulled from that forge. Despite the violence of their military-style attack, there wasn't a mark on her perfect skin from where the steel-jacketed bullets had struck her, nor was her skin burned from the devastating thermals of the UltLas.

Karalyn lay unconscious on her back before them, her wildly tangled yellow hair spread out across the sand, her lower body nearly transparent from the inner heat that now trapped deeply inside her body.

Two men with heavy asbestos gloves rolled her over on her back to observe the living filaments of her uniform reforming to close the gaps that the UltLas had burned in it.

Jim's thoughts drove him nearly insane. He stared at Karalyn in morbid fascination as he realized that he'd finally found at least one way to fight back against a Supremis, even if the technique was as bizarre as anything the Arions had described in their Archives. The dark spot in the back of his mind exalted that he'd found a chink in Karalyn's pretty armor.

His better half suddenly felt so sorry for what he had yet to do, for his job was not done.

"Ok, everybody out of here," he said in a tired voice. "I'll stay with the girl until she wakes up."

"Wake up?" one of the soldiers said in an awed voice. "How could anybody survive such a..."

"I said OUT, soldier. NOW!"

"Yes, sir," the Marine said stiffly as he grabbed his empty fire extinguisher and double-timed toward the far doorway.

Walking over to a side wall of the firing range, Jim unraveled a fire hose and sprayed the burning wood backstop. The huge ceiling fans quickly sucked out the smoke as a pool of water formed around Karalyn, slowly cooling her body until her skin stopped steaming. Turning off the hose to drop it in the sand, he bent down to lift her in his arms. Her head and arms dangled limply as he slowly

carried her out of the firing range and back down the hallway to his laboratory. She wasn't breathing and her heart wasn't beating, yet he knew enough from the Roswell Archives to know that she would revive once the effects of her orgasmic overload faded away.

He was saddened by the knowledge that he wasn't going to give her that time. He knew that it wouldn't be sufficient to momentarily disable the Arions when they met them in battle, they were going to have to ensure they stayed disabled. He would have to learn how to kill them.

Karalyn Jones was going to teach him how.

Chapter Three – Jersey Bound

1223 Onyx Lane in Oceanside, California

It was 6:30am when Allan Jones rapped on his sister's bedroom door. "Hey, Karalyn, get your butt in gear. I gotta get to school early for a special practice. I'm leaving in fifteen minutes, with or without you."

Allan waited for the inevitable crash of a shoe against the inside of his sister's door that would tell him she was awake. Nothing. He knocked harder. Karalyn didn't need much if any sleep, not physically at least, but he was very well aware what she was like if she missed getting at least a couple of hours shut-eye each night to refresh her mind. He was never going to forget the time she angrily wrenched the passenger-side door off his car on the way to school after missing two full nights sleep while studying for finals last term. The sheepish look on her face as she stood beside his car with his heavy door dangling in one hand hadn't been funny at all.

Naturally, she'd tried to fix it for him, but each of her clumsy attempts had just made it worse as she wasn't very mechanically inclined. She tended to overuse raw strength at the expense of finesse. That along with her ability to melt steel with her eyes usually made a big mess of things.

Allan cracked his sister's door open, fully prepared to duck out of the way of her favorite household weapon – an expertly thrown shoe. Instead, he was surprised to find her room empty, the bed still made. It took him only a few seconds to verify that her insulated metallic daypack was missing from her closet. He knew she only took that bag with her when she was planning on flying fast and far and needed to take her civvies in something that would keep them from burning up.

Kicking a pair of discarded socks and one of her short skirts to the side, he sat on his sister's soft bed while rummaging under the huge mound of pillows for her phone. He nearly sank out of sight in her fantastically soft feather mattress before finding the phone buried at the bottom of the pile. It was so soft and deep that he found it physically difficult to crawl his way back to the edge of the bed. He wondered for the hundredth time why a Girl of Steel had such an impossibly soft bed. It was really more of a nest.

His first call was to Keith, the guy Karalyn had been dating for nearly a year now. Knowing how close the two of them were getting, Allan found himself hoping that Keith didn't know where she'd spent the night. Like most brothers, he was very protective of his little sister.

The phone answered on the first ring. "Yeah. Talk."

"Hey, Keith, this is Allan. You heard from Karalyn this morning?"

"Ah, nope, not since school yesterday. She missed Lambert's class and the Principal was looking for her. Where in the hell did she take off to anyway, Allan?"

"D'Oh' that's why I called you, Keith."

Allan sighed with relief that Keith Roberts was ignorant of her whereabouts. He'd recently stumbled across the two of them when they were making out in the darkness of the backyard. He'd seen enough to realize that they were on very intimate terms. Karalyn's discarded top and Keith's unzipped pants had told him volumes about the terms of their endearment. Karalyn was barely sixteen. If his sister hadn't been an alien from the planet Velor who was invulnerable to any harm, not the least pregnancy, he would have been really worried.

“Well, hell if I know what she’s up to,” Keith said with a shrug that was nearly audible over the phone. “Probably just out skating again. With her grades, she hardly needs to sit in class anyway.”

“Skating all night?” Allan said doubtfully. “Not our Karalyn. She may get around a bit, but that’s not her style and she’s not THAT much into skating.”

Keith chuckled. “Wrong, bro. I’ve seen her skate a lot lately. I swear the girl can fly she’s got such cool moves. Unfortunately, Mr. Andrews doesn’t share our mutual appreciation for your little sister and her grades only count if she graduates.”

“Damn it all,” Allan said as he glanced at his watch. Practice was blown. He wracked his brain, trying to imagine where she might have gone. Unfortunately, her potential range included star systems outside their own. By diving into wormholes, she could be anywhere in the galaxy by now. An intimidating thought. But strangely, not as intimidating as the one that worried him the most. “All I know is that she didn’t sleep here last night, Keith, and I just thought you might, you know, have some idea where she is.”

Ignoring the suggestion in his words, Keith was suddenly worried himself. “You know, that guy she met from Houston, I think Alex’s his name, the old guy that’s always teaching people how to do really radical stunts, she could be with him. He was staring at Karalyn the other day like she was some kind of freak or else maybe really familiar looking or something. I swear the guy was going to cry as he saw her skate. He even had this old picture of a girl that looked just like Karalyn that he kept looking at. He said her name was Sara or something like that. He acted like she was dead or something.”

“What would he want with Karalyn?” Allan asked.

“Allan, she may be your sister, but in case you haven’t noticed, she’s outrageously cute. I think they broke the mold when they made her. I swear every gene was put there for a purpose.”

Allan chuckled, especially at Keith’s last comment. He was more right than he knew. “Like you’re all objective on that point, Keith.”

“Look,” Keith said as he changed the subject. He wasn’t going to gush over the obvious attributes of Allan’s sister in front of him. “I’ll grab my bike and head down to the park to see if she’s there with that Alex guy. You call Jenny and Chris to see if she’s at their places. I’ll call you back in thirty. Ok?”

“Yeah,” Allan said as he hung-up.

* * *

Two phone calls and thirty minutes later, his phone rang again.

“Any luck?” Keith asked.

“Nope. How ‘bout you?”

“Nobody at the park. Look, I’m coming over. Maybe she left some clues in her room.”

Allan looked around at the huge pile of books and magazines and discarded clothing that covered Karalyn’s desk and chairs. She had a voracious appetite for reading everything and anything she could get her hands on and her room suffered from it. Whatever specialized genetics she’d been born with, and whatever exotic alien protocols had given her the powers of a goddess, they hadn’t included the gene for neatness.

“Yeah,” Allan said vacantly, “I could really use some help here.”

Keith was at the door ten minutes later. Together the two of them began to sift through Karalyn’s room. Keith started searching through her drawers before Allan could gently guide him toward her desk. He wasn’t sure what kind of stuff might lurk in a Velorian’s lingerie drawers, and it was highly unlikely he’d find useful clues among her bras and panties.

It turned out to be a good plan as Keith was the one who came up with Karalyn’s DayPlanner from under a pile of books on her desk.

“Hey, check this out, Allan. It’s dated only *yesterday*.”

“Fly out to meet with Mr. Jim Caultron, Avalon Laboratory, New Jersey at 6:00PM. Wear uniform ... more testing for sure!”

Allan cringed as he looked over Keith’s shoulder at his sister’s unusually neat writing. The uniform thing was going to be hard to explain. He hoped Keith didn’t ask about it.

"I saw her between fifth and sixth period on her way to Mr. Lambert's class," Keith volunteered. "That's, ah, that would be about 5:45 or so in New Jersey. It takes five hours to fly from LA to New Jersey, not including getting to and from the airport. This is obviously totally bogus."

He started to turn the page.

"Hold it, Keith," Allan said. "Maybe she, ah, maybe she got there late. She could have gotten a flight out of John Wayne and been there by midnight."

Keith looked at Allan like he was deranged. "Why in the hell would your sister skip math class and fly off to some laboratory on the East Coast? And what's this 'uniform' thing? What is she, some kind of secret agent? You know, like Emma Peel in *The Avengers*?"

Allan grimaced as his mind raced to come up with some kind of answer. He decided to say the most outrageous thing he could to try to put Keith off the scent. "Naw, nothing like that. She's really a bug-eyed alien from another galaxy who wears a fake face on Earth," Allan said in a disgusted tone of voice. "She does shit like this all the time."

Keith punched him in the arm as he lowered his voice. "Yeah, I know, she told me all about the alien thing."

Allan's jaw nearly hit the floor. "She did? All of it?"

Keith shrugged. "Yeah, sure. She said it's a big secret that she was born in this town near Stockholm that's called Veloren or something like that. Her real Mom and Dad were secret agents and that she grew up in Paris before her parents got killed on some mission. She told me how the CIA brought her back to the U.S. and got her a new identity and you guys adopted her. She's in deep cover now, hiding from these neo-Nazi Aryans."

Allan slowly let his breath out. Karalyn had obviously been getting more creative than usual with her "history." But the "CIA" connection could be useful here.

"So, then you know that she only pretends to live an ordinary life. That she has this secret job."

“Yeah, right, like I believe a word of it. When I told my Mom about it she said that adopted kids often make up stories like that about their past. And thanks for trying to lighten things up, Allan, but this is serious shit. She’s a very pretty girl and there are people who, you know, take advantage of girls like her. Especially here in LA.”

“Trust me,” Allan said confidently as he looked up at a school picture of Karalyn posing with her dive team, her body so much tighter and curvier than the other girls, her swimsuit smaller too. She’d always been fantastically fit and shapely. “Nobody takes advantage of my little sister; she works out and she’d kick some masher’s butt halfway to Catalina. But just to make sure, let’s try to call that place in Jersey and find that, what was his name?” He looked back at Karalyn’s Day Timer. “Mr. Caultron.”

“Cool,” Keith said as Allan picked up the phone. “So you’re saying her history isn’t totally bogus?”

“Trust me, Keith, it’s real enough. She has to keep some stuff secret so that those Aryans don’t find her. And she does have some connections that are related to her real Mom. That much is true.”

“I knew it,” Keith said as he smacked his fist into his hand. “Karalyn isn’t the type to make shit like that up. So, maybe she still knows people at Langley or something. Is that in New Jersey?”

Allan reached up to check the length of his nose. Unlike Pinocchio’s, it hadn’t grown any longer.

* * *

A frustrating hour passed, an hour where they got nowhere. The receptionist at the Avalon National Laboratory knew nothing about a Mr. Caultron nor anything about a girl from Oceanside, California. She said the lab was part of the Health Department. They tested milk for bacteria, stuff like that.

Calls to the CIA and FBI offices didn’t help either as they got routed to receptionists who answered every question with their own questions her own. The one at the FBI said she’d never even heard of the Avalon Laboratory, but she’d be glad to connect them to the Health Department.

“No surprise there,” Keith said as he finally hung up. “Those paranoid crazies are all schizoid anyway, or so my Mom says. You really think she went out there to Jersey?”

Allan nodded. He’d already checked the hidden cubbyhole in the back of Karalyn’s closet, the place she kept her Velorian flight uniform. It was gone. Given that she rarely wore it under her street clothes, he knew she was off on some kind of mission.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure. She’s been doing this project for a guy who was a friend of her Mom’s,” Allan lied as he gave credence to the story she’d told Keith. “It supposedly involved some folks at the FBI and CIA. Something about secret weapons, I think.”

He’d so soon said those words when he began to wonder how he was going to keep Karalyn’s identity a secret when they did find her. It was unlikely that it would be the kind of trouble that an ordinary girl would get into. “I think it’s some sort of Project X thing.” Allan added, hoping he wasn’t overdoing it.

“You mean like on *The X-Files*?” Keith gushed excitedly. He’d had a few really intense dreams about Karalyn as some kind of secret agent who wore a skintight costume like on *The Avengers*. She was always disappearing at odd times and stuff like that anyway, so it wasn’t hard to image that she was up to something.

“Yeah, kind of like that. What say we go and try to find her?”

Keith laughed. “You want to drive your old Honda to New Jersey? Be real, Allan. The friggin’ door would fall off again before we got halfway across the desert.”

“No, asshole, I mean let’s get two airline tickets.” He suddenly produced a Visa card with his mother’s name on it. “Ta da.”

“Oh, man, we’re going to get busted so bad.”

“Nah, my Mom won’t mind as long as we pay it back,” Allan said as he lied yet again.

Avalon National Laboratory

It was almost dark when they reached the turnoff for the front gate of Avalon Labs.

It had been a hassle all the way, first paying through the nose for last-minute tickets on the redeye from California the night before -- the first flight they could find at any price -- then getting a rental car at Newark Airport. The agencies nearly all seemed to assume that anybody Allan's age was a bad risk, so they'd had to pay through the nose again. Mom was going to have a fit when she got her Visa bill, he thought.

They hadn't bothered to look at a road map before they arrived, and when they did they discovered that Brighton, New Jersey, was clear down in the fucking Pine Barrens, closer to Philly than to Newark. Then there was that monster traffic jam on the Jersey Turnpike headed south. By the time Allan Jones and Keith Edwards reached Avalon National Laboratory at the end of a long, lonely two-lane road, they were really pissed, and fatigued beyond reason.

The road ended at brightly lit gate. Behind it, a complex of low buildings were barely visible in the trees. A double row fence topped by high-security razor wire surrounded it, with the inner fence labeled Danger: High Voltage.

An even larger sign by the side of the road made it clear that this wasn't some Health Department facility.

WARNING MILITARY RESERVATION

It is unlawful to enter this installation without the written permission of the installation commander.

Another sign warned that trespassing was punishable by a fine of \$1,000 or six months imprisonment or both. Still another told them that photography was strictly prohibited, not that they had a camera with them in any case. Yet another was in fine print, so they didn't notice the bit about all persons and their property being subject to search, let alone the chilling:

Use of deadly force authorized

“Is this Area 51, or what?” Allan asked.

“Nah, it’s gotta be Area 57. You know, where they experiment with alien hybrid ketchup?”

Allan didn’t think it was funny. Neither did Keith, actually. It was just their way of whistling in dark. But they were determined just the same. Allan drove slowly up to the gate. It was manned by a number of Marine security guards in white helmets. To either side, they saw the double row of chain-link fence. The scrub pines were cleared to a depth of 50 feet on either side of the fence. They could see one guard starting a canine patrol between the fences.

The Marines didn’t even let them get as far as the gate.

“Turn right around and go back where you came from,” the sergeant in charge told them. “You’ve already read the signs.”

Shit, thought Allan. They must have been watching them with surveillance cameras. He shook his head. He wasn’t going to come all this way and go back empty-handed.

“We’re here to see Commander Caultron,” he told the guard. “I’m Allan Jones. My sister works for him. She’s here. He knows us.”

“There ain’t no Commander Caultron; anyway, if there were, you wouldn’t know him or anybody else here.”

Allan tried to be conciliatory. “Look, I’m just worried about my sister is all,” he said. “Keith here, too; he’s her boyfriend. She said she was going to be back by now. Couldn’t you call in and ask about her? We’ll stay right here.”

“You’ll stay nowhere. Turn around. Drive away. Now.” The Guard accented his words by fingering his holster.

It looked hopeless. But it was about to become even more hopeless.

“We know she’s an alien,” Keith shouted across the car. “We know what you people do here!”

Keith didn't know what he was talking about. But it was instantly clear that the Marines did, as they reached for their weapons.

"Out of the car!" said the one with stripes. He was pointing a 9mm their way. "Hands over your heads!"

In a panic, Allan tried to shift into reverse. He gunned the engine. But, unused to the rental car's controls, he put it in drive instead. He floored it, and the vehicle lurched ahead, crashing into the heavy gate. The wheels screeched and spun in a cloud of smoke as the gate bent inward and then snapped open. The car twisted sideways and nearly slid off the road. Allan twisted the wheel and accelerated, straightening out.

Behind them, the startled guards recovered, and started firing at them. At least two shots came through the rear window, spraying them with glass. Allan ducked and raced down in the inner road, hoping to get out of range. He couldn't think beyond that.

Suddenly, headlights appeared in front of them, bearing down on them. They were in for it now. Allan swerved around the approaching headlights, lost control; the rental car left the road, bounced across the cleared ground along it, and smashed up against the scrub pines.

The car's horn was sounding continuously as the Guards raced across the clearing, safeties off, ready to fire.

Chapter Four – Dark Angel

An abandoned building along McCarter Highway in Newark, earlier the same day

Seth Vickers was sweating profusely as he struggled up six flights of stairs. The decrepit old warehouse that he'd chosen in Newark belonged to his father's import/export business. The orange paint was peeling from the walls, and puddles of slimy water made the steps treacherous. Clearly, his father's business was nearly out of business.

He was sweating from more than the simple effort of pushing his 300 pounds up the steps. The meeting he was heading for was something out of *The X-Files*, and he knew that there was a good chance he wouldn't be alive ten minutes from now. Assuming the woman he was supposed to meet even showed up. He was here to meet the Arion combat operative that he'd contacted on the phone, and he suspected she was the class of warrior that his boss at Avalon Labs called a "Prime."

Primes, even more than ordinary Arions, were very, *very* dangerous, and were known to cruelly kill humans without provocation, and without compassion. As hunters, they saw the people of Earth more as prey than fellow humans.

Under anything resembling normal circumstances, he'd have done anything to avoid meeting one of these aliens. Instead, he'd issued the invitation to the meeting. Come alone, she'd said. No recording devices, no cameras.

* * *

The chain of events that had brought him to this remarkable meeting had begun several months earlier. As the cryogenic tech responsible for a very special collection of specimens at Avalon Labs, he'd had access to a lot of documents. And he saw the specimens every day, floating in the liquid helium tubes he maintained. Specimens that weren't entirely human.

Seth worked for Max Engelbrecht, Director of Special Projects at Avalon, and he was one of the few people who knew what Max was up to. He'd been proud to have been part of Max's plans – that is, until his friend Sarah had shown up in one of the tubes. The sight of her floating lifeless at near absolute zero, her body blue-white, had torn his heart apart.

Sarah had been Max's Administrative Assistant; Seth and Sarah had been dating for a while. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever known, and he'd been amazed when she agreed to go out with him. Even more, when she appeared to sincerely enjoy his company. He'd quickly fallen hard for her.

The result was that he'd been frantic when she disappeared that Wednesday night two years and three months ago. Rumors about a serial killer circulated in the lab. Seth was pretty sure that Max had started those rumors. They'd had a

memorial service for her, and Seth had attended, unashamed when he cried while hugging a picture of her to his chest.



But he'd accepted the inevitable. Sarah was gone – nobody knew where. He tried to date other women during the last two years, but it hadn't worked out.

Then, out of the blue, Sarah showed up in one of the Cryo tubes in Max's lab. Seth had stared at her for ten minutes, not wanting to believe what his eyes were telling him. Then he'd read the chart that sat on the table next to the tube.

Sarah Everclear, Betan.

Seth had been devastated and shocked beyond horror as he stared at her lifeless yet perfectly preserved form. She looked exactly like the rest of Max's specimens.

He was smart enough to hold his surging emotions back at first. Claiming he was sick and that he had to go home early, he had certainly looked it. Rushing into the bathroom to vomit, he'd grabbed his backpack and had barely made it to his truck before he broke down completely, crying like a baby.

By the time he ran out of tears, his anguish and loss had been replaced by anger. He knew how Sarah had gotten into that tube. Max's alien protocol. The chart had said she was a deep-cover Arion Betan. She'd certainly fooled Seth.

It didn't matter. He remembered her gentle nature and her kindness. That memory kindled a hot anger to avenge his girlfriend's untimely death. Despite her Arion birthright, she hadn't deserved such a fate. Nobody did. Especially not a girl who'd been raised on Earth. Who loved this planet as much as he did.

Sure, he knew like everyone else in Special Project that they were fighting for control of Earth. The Arions were a violent and abusive race, and militant in the extreme. But Sarah had been none of those things. Raised on Earth since the age of two, she'd been a sweet girl. Her only crime, a capital one to Engelbrecht, was that she was an Arion deep implant agent.

Yet while they'd been dating, Seth had never suspected Sarah was anything but human. He didn't know enough at the time to recognize the signs. Only after he started filling the tubes with Max's specimens did he learn what Arions were really like. Sarah's unflawed physical perfection and surprising athleticism now made sense.

Seth himself had never been very athletic, but after Sarah disappeared, he'd let himself go completely. Sarah, in contrast, had always looked like one of those tanned, lean fitness models in the magazines, with a high-cheekbone face that belonged on the cover of *Vogue*. His body ached as he remembered how she'd used those talents to thrill him in the privacy of his apartment.

He tried to tell himself that it was a matter of national security. Planetary security. She'd been an Arion.

It didn't help. He'd loved her anyway. He still did.

Then he tried to rationalize that she'd been dangerous, a lethal alien that she had to be put down just like all the rest.

But his memories of her gentleness and ready laugh and quick intelligence reminded him otherwise.

Without realizing why he was doing it, he slipped her address book out of her personal effects, and used Avalon's tie in to the FBI computers to do a background check on everyone in it. When he was done, he'd identified two names that he suspected were other Arions.

Still he did nothing. He went about doing his job, avoiding looking at Sarah's face every day as she floated in her tube, his heart tearing further apart each time he saw her blue body. He felt like quitting the job a dozen times, but he knew too much to just walk away. They'd assign him to some radar station in Greenland or something. At least here, he was close to Sarah.

He continued to do his job, keeping the tubes filled with liquid helium, making sure that the control mechanisms were humming smoothly. And all the time, his life slowly grew colder... almost as cold as the corpsicles in the tubes.

Then the Prime had shown up in a sixth tube in Avalon. Her corpsicle form had apparently been stored somewhere out in Nevada for years before being transferred here.

Engelbrecht spoke of the Prime as if they'd worked together, describing her almost as if she'd been his lover. That tore a new wound in Seth's heart. Engelbrecht went on to claim she'd been a rogue. Then he boasted proudly how she'd been his girlfriend, how they'd almost gotten married. He'd laughed off someone's idea that the Empire was just trying to infiltrate their operation. He claimed they were too disorganized to find him, and if they did, he'd kill their agents off like these first two. Arions couldn't stand against eons of Earthly practice in self-protection and xenophobia.

Seth knew at that point that the Arion Empire would pay anything to learn what he knew. Allowing himself to think the thoughts of a traitor to his oath, to his nation, even to his planet, he knew there was but a single way out of his sordid existence. He had nothing left to lose. His dignity was gone, his soul's spark extinguished, leaving nothing behind but the empty shell of his life. And that wasn't worth living anymore.

He finally made his move. Half drunk on Budweiser, he was always braver when he was drinking, he'd called the two mysterious women in Sarah's address book. He told the women who answered that he had evidence of a US government agency who'd killed a number of Arions. He said he wanted to put an end to it. He insisted on speaking to one of their 'combat operatives'. He left his home number and hung up before they could say a word.

No one called back for a week. He was beginning to give up hope when his phone had rung last night at 2:30am. A woman had been on the other end, her voice stunningly musical despite her guttural accent. He'd known in an instant that he was talking to one of the genetic perfect Primes. A superhuman. She'd asked him what he wanted in return for the information he was offering. He said he'd only discuss it at a face-to-face meeting.

A meeting had been set up in this old warehouse.

How insane that had been, he chastised himself, knowing it had been the damn alcohol and sleepiness speaking. Forcing a meeting with a murderous Prime? Insanity.

Now he was seconds away from that meeting. He wondered if she'd hear him out before killing him. He'd read Engelbrecht's reports about the Arion-born. Unlike implanted agents like Sarah, the Arion-born warriors hunted Terrans like wild animals.

Even if she did listen to him, would she take the deal? Or did she have some kind of alien device that would suck his brain dry of information, and then cast his lifeless hulk aside? The Arions had all kinds of deep hypnosis techniques, or so Engelbrecht had said.

He prayed that his innermost secrets would remain his own, at least until he was ready to trade them away on his terms. And if he was wrong? Well, he didn't much care to keep living this way anyway. With a Prime's powers, he knew that death would come quickly and probably painlessly to him.

His heart was pounding and he was gasping for breath when he reached for the door handle on the sixth floor. The thought briefly crossed his mind that he was selling out his fellow humans. Then he remembered Sarah's untimely death.

That had been an inhuman act, yet performed by humans. His kind were no better than the Arions, or so he told himself. Then there was his crummy job. And his growing obesity. Not to mention his complete lack of girlfriends. Of any friends for that matter. The aching emptiness of an shallow life was swallowing him hole, reducing his life to that of going from work to his collection of DVD's and then back to work each day, the days, weeks and months passing in an out-of-focus daze.

Yet inside, he still remembered what it felt like to be in love. To be loved. He wanted that feeling again. What he'd shared with Sarah had been special. He was willing to trade anything for that. Even his humanity. He would trade anything. Even his life.

It was going to end here, one way or another.

Emboldened by his thoughts, he took a shuddering breath and turned the doorknob. The door swung open on creaky hinges. At first the room looked empty. And then he saw her.

A young woman, seemingly in her early twenties, stepped from the shadows to stand in front of the lone window in the room. She was very tall and slender, her bare legs her most prominent feature. Perfectly shaped and wickedly fit, her skin tanned and flawless, those incredibly long legs ending in a pair of stiletto-heeled boots. Tracing his eyes upward, he found that her face was still in shadow, yet her eyes glowed with an inner light. She looked like Sarah had looked. Only better.

A shiver traveled down his back as he remembered what he'd read of a Prime's obscene power. Engelbrecht said his Prime had vaporized a rude lab technician with a single, pointed stare. The technician's body had been reduced to a bleached skeleton, his fat rendered to a puddle on the floor, his charred flesh giving off a black cloud of stomach-rending stench. The Prime had acted in front of a dozen witnesses, clearly daring them to do anything about it.

Seth pushed that horrific image away as he forced himself to look this new Prime. Her short hair was windblown, and she wore a black outfit with baggy sleeves and a high collar. The fabric grew progressive tighter as it hugged her

waist, finally ending in a tightly fitting leotard. He couldn't help but stare down at her perfect legs again, his heart racing as he tried to comprehend the power they held.

A Prime had thousands of times his strength, or so Engelbrecht had said. As shocking as that was, the emotional impact of that kind of strength hadn't really struck home until now. Engelbrecht was always clinical when he talked about his Prime.

But now Seth was standing in front of this pretty, young woman, and her supreme strength made no sense at all. Sure, he'd done the math; everyone had. Instead of an Olympic running broad-jump of twenty feet, a Prime's long legs enabled her to leap a half nautical mile at a time. Yet this girl was so incredibly slender, so absolutely feminine. So flawlessly perfect, almost delicate looking.

He refused to even think the word that was clamoring for intention in the back of his head. It got out anyway.

Goddess.

He pushed the word away. No, probably more a dark angel from hell than anything else.

He blinked his eyes and came back to his senses long enough to realize that the Arion was carefully watching him as he stared at her. Embarrassed by his thoughts, a flush of color rose from his neck.

"Ah, hi, I'm Seth," he tried to say, only to have the words come out as a croak.

She tilted her head, and her eyes grew brighter yet.

He licked his lips as his mouth went dry. Unable to move from the doorway, the combination of fear and anxiety and anticipation making his legs shake, he just stared in awe at her as her eyes began to glow like lasers. A flash of prickling heat washed over him from head to toe as she slowly scanned him. He recognized her look for what it was – a touch of heat vision combined with her native ability to see through things. She was taking him apart with her eyes, while at the same time warning him not to move. He shuddered at the subtle threat of her power, knowing that she could turn him into a smoking skeleton with only a

slightly more intense stare. His stomach turned and his blood ran cold as he imagined his flesh melting and then burning like burgers on a too hot barbecue grill.

"You are what you say you are," she finally spoke, her voice rich and vibrant. A singer's voice, he thought to himself.

"And you... you're an Arion. A Prime?" It was all he could do to form words with his lips.

"And what do you know of Primes?"

"I know what you can do. I know you claim you cannot be harmed by any weapon of man." He paused, deciding to put his trump card on the table right from the start. "Yet one of your sisters lies dead in the place I work."

"Sarah Everclear," she said quickly. She'd done her research, presumably based on who he'd called from Sarah's address book. "She was not of my caste."

"She was Arion."

"And you were her friend, no?"

"Yes, I was."

"We call them Betan. They serve us."

"Not all of them. There are others in the place I work. All dead. One of them is a Prime."

The woman's eyes flashed again. "That is impossible."

"Her name was Teza."

The woman gasped softly and sagged against the window. "I feared as much," she said softly.

"You knew the other Prime?"

"Teza Lan'tran was my sister. The first born of my family. The first to come to Earth." She caught herself, and stood back up straight as a rail. "No Frail could harm a hair on her head. Not even with your most feared weapons."

"The people I work with have her floating in liquid helium. She's been there for years. I assure you, she is quite dead."

The Prime spun around in the blink of an eye. He saw her shoulders shake as if crying. "Some said she went rogue." Her voice was almost too soft to hear. "That she betrayed our cause."

"I don't know about that," Seth lied. "All I know is that a group of scientists are working on finding a way to stop you. A weapon that even a Prime cannot withstand. They must have used it on her first."

She spun around. "Terran scientists? Weapons as powerful as a Vendorian's? A joke, yes?"

"Yes. And no."

"If so, then you hold the greatest secret on this planet. A secret the Empire will pay royally for."

"That's why I'm here." Seth's legs were shaking as he walked closer to the girl, amazed that he was still alive. Even more amazed that this fearsome warrior was behaving like a girl who'd just lost her sister, her emotions so human. He looked at her closely as the light from the window found her eyes. They were filled with tear. Even more surprisingly, he saw that she was wearing eye shadow. Made up this way, she looked so incredibly and perfectly normal. A tear traced down her cheek. That stunned him. She was a murderous and inhuman Prime. Yet like Sarah, she had a human heart. She was mourning her sister's death like any other human would.

He caught himself in that thought. No, that was a mistake. She was not like Sarah. This girl was a warrior, and she had physical powers that matched the descriptions of the Kryptonians in his favorite comic books. Yet unlike the benevolent protection of the comic-book Kryptonians, her kind thought his kind were here for the killing.

He took a quick step backward as the woman brushed away her tears. She sat down on the only chair in the room, straddling it backwards as she struggled visibly to control her emotions. She finally looked up at him with tear-bright eyes. "Okay. You've got my attention, Seth Vickers. You've also put your life in my hands, to take or not as I see fit. What more do you offer to entice me to let you live?"

“A way to get inside Avalon Laboratories without anyone knowing you are there.”

“Why should I be interested in that?”

“That’s where your sister is. It’s where men are researching how to kill you and your kind.” He stepped close enough to hand her a folder. “The woman that this file belongs to is slated to start work in my department tomorrow. If we come to an agreement, I’ll replace her picture with yours tonight. You can study her background, then make sure she doesn’t show up for work, and then arrive in her place tomorrow at 7:00am.”

The Prime opened the file and scanned it, her eyes flicking back and forth at fantastic speed as she read twenty pages as fast as she could turn them. She closed the folder. “This woman is being hired for the same job that Sarah Everclear had.”

“True. The woman who replaced Sarah just took maternity leave. We’ve hired a Temp to replace her. That could be you..” He shuddered as he realized he’d just signed the other Temp’s death warrant. He hadn’t thought that part through. Too late to change now.

“Assuming I do any of this. You haven’t said what you want in return?”

Seth wet his lips again. The moment of truth had come. “First, I want to know your name. Your real name.”

The Prime laughed softly. “Do you know that my code demands that we give our real names only to those humans we are about to kill?”

Seth stiffened. “Are you going to kill me?”

“Some day, probably,” she answered with a warrior’s honesty. “But for today, you have given me something to think about. And information on my sister. No Frail has ever given me such gifts. I am in your debt.”

“Your name then.” Seth’s heart was pounding. The Prime was acting grateful. How amazing, given Engelbrecht’s opinion of them.

“Alya,” she said almost too softly to hear.

“Well then, Alya Lan’tan, my requests are simple at one level, complicated at another.”

"Money I presume," she said derisively. "It's always about money with you Frails. You'd sell your planet for the right price."

Seth was undeterred. "If you say so. I could ask for billion, but I want only ten million dollars. There's an account number clipped inside that file. I won't live long enough to spend more than that."

"And what's the complicated part."

"Sarah and I were friends. Good friends. I miss her."

Alya closed her eyes and sighed, guessing what was coming. The man was grossly fat, obviously undesirable to females. There was always one thing Terrans wanted besides money, especially when confronted with Arion beauty.

"I want you to assign one of your Betans to be my friend."

She blinked her eyes open. "Your friend?"

"You know what I mean. My girlfriend."

Alya sighed deeply. She'd guessed right. "You want me to snap my fingers and order someone up to replace Sarah?"

"Except that she should be younger, perhaps eighteen."

"Sounds more like a daughter than a girlfriend."

"Slender like you," Seth continued, lost in his long rehearsed speech. "Very pretty. And completely devoted to me," Seth said daringly, his heart threatening to leap out of his chest. "My lover."

"You mean your young whore?"

Seth shook his head violently. "No, nothing so crude. I want her to truly care about me."

"You can buy some things. But not that."

"I've read some speculation about your hypnotic programming. How you can plant thoughts in someone's mind to be activated upon some event. Your deep-implant agents are all prepared this way. I want this girl to fall in love with me the moment she sees me. I want to see that loving light in her eyes."

Alya stood up quickly, the old chair collapsing between her long legs with a groan of tortured metal. "That's a fairy tale," she said angrily. "Snow White and the Young Prince."

"It is my request." He screwed up the last of his courage. "My demand."

"I should just kill you now, you pervert. You want to defile a perfect daughter of Aria with that soft, slobbering, smelly body of yours. That's obscene."

"It's the only deal I'll make," Seth said, his voice strained and weak now. Ecstasy or death, the choice was hanging on a thread now.

"You've already told me enough to get inside this laboratory of yours." She waved the file folder angrily. "Why do I need you? Why shouldn't I just vaporize you right here and now and get this over with?"

"You can't get into Avalon if I don't insert your photograph in the Lab files tonight, and then vouch for you with Security. They need a personal reference from an insider before they'll issue a badge. Personal recognizance."

"I could tear my way inside. Kick your entire building down. You couldn't stop me."

"I'm sure you could tear your way barehanded into even Fort Knox. But that's useless here. In a Class-4 Security Alert, all computer data is erased. You'd find a few corpses, sure, but nothing more. No clue as to how they died. No idea how to combat any weapons they are developing. We need to work together to learn that. You and me and my new young lady, as yet unnamed."

Alya turned back to look out the window. The girl he wanted was immaterial despite her emotional outburst of a moment before. They had many Betans on Earth. No, it was that the offer seemed too good to be true. Earth's entire anti-alien program handed to her on a silver platter. A position in their lab.

She'd been on Earth for a year now, in command of a hundred Betans in New Jersey, and her people hadn't turned up anything that had a hundredth the potential to help their cause as this deal. Few Frails were willing to serve an alien agenda. Even the criminals they employed for messy jobs tended to turn on them. She'd killed dozens of them since she'd arrived.

She wanted to just kill the Frail and walk away. Maybe destroy his laboratory, set them back a few years. But the stakes were too high. A weapon that could kill Primes? It seemed improbable. But then, her sister had disappeared. And she didn't want to think she'd gone rogue. That she'd deserted the cause.

Even more convincingly, this man knew Teza's real name. What were the odds of these Frails learning such a thing? And still being alive? A billion to one. Unless this man had known her, or had contact with people who had.

She knew she should contact Command before going further, but the mother ship was out of position, replenishing its fuel at one of the gas giants. She had to make a decision. On her own. Right now.

"I agree to both requests," she said as she slowly turned back to face Seth. "You get me in there, and I'll send you your little playmate. I just hope you like bruises, for she will be a true daughter of Aria."

Seth beamed as the weight of mortal dread lifted from his chest. It was replaced by a surge of heated arousal. The dreams of a hundred nights were now close to coming true. "That's perfect, Alya. Now all I need is your picture." He held out his hand. "Partner."

Alya briefly considered crushing his hand to bloody pulp, but instead clasped her hands behind her back, disgusted at the mere thought of touching him. The Frail was so slimy he made her stomach turn. "Just the picture. And one of you. For the girl's programming. Expect her to arrive after dinner."

* * *

Seth drove back to Avalon that afternoon and waltzed into the Security office.

"Engelbrecht said to drop this by before I went home," he said. "We've got a new assistant admin starting with us next week."

The Duty Officer took the file and opened it. The picture of Alya, now Susan Summerfield, stared back at him.

"Holy shit. Your boss knows how to pick 'em. She's a real looker. Wicked eyes."

"You don't know the half of it. Just wait until you see the rest of the package. She looks like a supermodel."

The Duty Officer closed the file and tossed it on his desk. "Sure be nice to have something better to look at over in Special Projects than your fat ass."

Seth flipped him the bird. "She's due for orientation at early Monday. I'll be here to vouch for her."

"She married?"

"Nope. No boyfriend either, least not that I know of."

"Then maybe Monday will be my lucky day," the Duty Officer smiled. "Don't worry about her. I'll make sure she gets our best treatment. My personal best."

"Do that. Make her feel really welcome. She's from Denmark, by the way. Her father was with the U.S. Consulate there, and he married a local woman. Maybe she'll want somebody to show her around the area after work."

"Yeah. A pub and pizza tour. Can't beat that. If she's half Danish, then I'm sure she likes beer. Viking blood and all."

"Right, I'm sure she does," Seth said as he walked out the door, confident now that the hook was set. A face as pretty as Alya's could turn any man's head. Now all he had to do was hurry home and clean the place up before his part of the deal arrived.

He'd barely made it out the back gate when a siren began to sound over near the front gate of the complex. He pressed the gas pedal of his old Ford F150 to the floor and drove off as fast as he could. No security exercise was going to ruin his night.

Seth Vickers' Apartment

The knock on Seth's door came as he was clearing the pile of empty microwave dinner boxes away. The knock was soft, almost tentative. He struggled to his feet, moving as fast as his bulk would allow. He ran his hands through his thinning hair to straighten it as he paused with his hand on the door knob. He wasn't a religious man, but he said a little prayer anyway, just in case. He prayed the girl would be even half as beautiful as Alya. That she'd be as young as he'd asked.

He opened the door, only to have his jaw drop as he found that Alya had exceeded his dreams in both departments. A beautiful teenage girl was standing

in his hallway. She had raven hair and blue eyes, and was dressed in a simple baby blue top that left her arms and shoulder bare.

She turned her head and stared back at him curiously, studying his face, her doubtful look making him wonder if she was at the wrong door. No... nobody merely human could look this good, he told himself. She just had to be a genetically-engineered Arion.

She was young, yet her breasts were as full as a mature woman's and impossibly firm, to her arms and legs, slender yet fit-looking. Her black hair was cut short and windblown much like Alya's had been. Her eyes sparkled like blue diamonds. Standing there in a clingy blue top with spaghetti straps, she was a feverish night's dream come true

They stared at each other in silence for nearly thirty seconds, and then the girl's eyelids fluttered, and her eyes rolled back in her head, her eyes closing. A few seconds passed before they snapped back open, her pupils focusing sharply on his. A tiny smile started and faded on her lips, and then returned, suddenly blossoming into a wide grin. She lifted her arms and threw herself at him, wrapping them around his neck to hug him tightly, her body feeling so tiny as she pressed herself against the bulk of his own.

"Seth! Oh my God, Seth. I thought I'd lost you forever." Her soft lips found his to smother him with kisses.

Seth staggered back, shocked by the sudden triggering, clearly the result of hypnotic imprinting. He pulled the door closed behind him, and then swept her up in his arms. So tall, so slender, yet surprisingly heavy. But also delightfully affectionate. Her kisses covered his face, her soft lips finding his eyes, his ears, her tongue tracing around it to send an explosion of tingles through his body. He gasped as her lips found his again, kissing him deeply now, her sweet tongue intertwining hungrily, her sweet breath like wildflowers, her taste like honey. His arousal surged so powerfully that it was all he could do to walk toward the bedroom with his prize.

"I never had time to tell you this before, but I love you so, so much," she purred between kisses. "I just never, ever thought I'd find you alive after your ship went down on Sarken's World."

Turning into the bedroom doorway, he smacked her head against the doorframe in his excitement. Hard. She didn't even notice.

"And this new disguise of yours, Seth. It's so totally cool. A fat Arion. Hah! The Frails will never suspect."

He set her down beside the bed. She smiled sexily at him, her height an inch greater than his. "Remember the way we used to make love up in the observatory on the Admiral Korgan, Seth? Floating weightlessly. Loving so tenderly. God, we made love for days and days up there."

Seth nodded vigorously, agreeing to implanted memories he'd barely even dared dream of. Memories that somebody had poured into her head. Very good memories.

"The gravity is a lot higher here on this Earth, but do you want to try that again? Your favorite. That incredibly delicate, tantric loving you taught me about. It's so delicious."

"Oh God, yes!" he panted, a part of him impressed that they'd had the foresight to program her for gentle sex. He knew that a Betan girl like her had ten times his strength and enough sexual endurance to wipe out the Pittsburgh Steelers. Alya had done well. Very well.

He smiled like a kid unwrapping his presents at Christmas as he started to slip the straps of her top from her shoulders. She closed her eyes and just smiled. He'd slipped the second strap off when a sudden worrying thought crossed his mind: he didn't know her name. He couldn't exactly ask her, given her implanted memories as his long lost lover.

She put his worries behind him as she reached up to hold his hands, using them to guide her top down to her waist. He stared down at heaven itself as she bent over and lifted his 300 pounds off the floor as if he was as light as a child. She bounced him in her arms, her feet shuffling as she worked to maintain her balance.

“You aren’t weightless any more, my love. But not exactly heavy either.” She lowered him gently to the bed, watching his wide-open eyes on her as she wriggled out of the rest of her clothes. She finished by kicking her high heels off to crash against the far wall of the bedroom. Seth was just starting to fumble with his belt when she leaped on top of him, straddling him with her strong legs, her hands tearing ripping his shirt open as her kisses found his lips again.

“I’ve been such a good girl, Seth. Your Caitlyn, remaining true forever, just as we’d promised.”

His heart soared as he let his imagination go and followed her lead. “Oh, my Caitlyn, my love, I have dreamed of you every day. Praying for this day. Never daring hope it would come true that I would truly see my angel again.”

Every word he said was true. She was indeed the dark angel of his dreams. From Heaven or Hell, Seth no longer cared where she’d come from. He only knew that he was as truly in love as she surely was.

Twenty miles south, the town of Bradford

Anne Sobrosky walked out of the ShopRite with a bag of groceries in each arm. She was feeling hope for the first time in months, so much so that she’d used the last of her meager funds to buy an expensive bottle of perfume. Obsession. Her favorite. She’d wear it tomorrow when she showed up for work.

She’d been just scraping by ever since Navrain Industries laid her off during the downturn, and now she had a new job. Only a temporary assignment perhaps, but it was good for a predictable three months. That was how long that administrator at Avalon Laboratories was going to be out on maternity leave. Surely the economy would be picking up by that time.

She put her bags into the trunk and opened the door to slide in, only to be shocked to see a young woman dressed in denim sitting in the passenger’s seat. “Whoah,” Anne said as she tried to slide back out the door. The woman reached out to grab her wrist.

“Close the door and be quiet. It will be easier for you that way.”

Her accent sounded vaguely German to Anne, but her voice was rich with a dozen tremulous highlights. Anne tried to pull away, but the fingers around her wrist tightened painfully.

“Just drive off as if nothing is happening and you won’t feel any pain.”

“But why? Who are you? Where are you taking me?” Anne’s voice startled to tremble.

“My name is Alya Lan’tan.” In contrast, Alya’s voice was soft, giving no clue that the giving of her name had just doomed Anne. “Just drive, Anne.”

Anne’s hand was trembling as the woman let her wrist go so she could insert the key. It took her several tries. She finally started the car and headed out of the parking lot for the highway. “How do you know my name?” she finally dared ask as they merged into the Interstate traffic.

“I know only that you are slated to go to work tomorrow at Avalon Laboratories.”

“Oh,” Anne sighed, suddenly realizing what was going on. “Is this the last part of my security check? Some kind of test. Right?” Anne had been a bit apprehensive about working in such a high security installation.

Alya said nothing for a moment. “The last part, for sure. A final test of your courage.”

Anne drove in silence for another minute, glancing over at the tall woman beside her. She was young, late teens probably, and very slender, her eyes the brightest shade of blue she’d ever seen. She was beautiful, dressed the way she was in the latest fashion jeans, her midriff bared in the style of a young woman. The Britney Spears look, Anne decided. Not what she’d expected of FBI agent. Except for the athleticism. Anne flexed her sore hand.

“You’re FBI, right?”

Alya slowly shook her head. “Try NEC.”

“Don’t they make computers?”

Alya looked blankly across the car at the Terran woman. “Near Earth Command,” she said icily.

“Military?” Anne asked.

Alya closed her eyes and tried not to think about the task at hand. Unlike most of her kind, she didn't hate Terrans, and she didn't enjoy killing the innocent ones. She shrugged, rationalizing to herself that some casualties were expected in war. "You wouldn't understand if I told you," she finally offered. The last thing she wanted to do was to have a chatty conversation with the woman she was about to kill.

"Understand what?" Anne asked, her voice high and thin. Growing anxious again. "Near Earth? Some Command thing. Are you really military?"

Alya said nothing.

"That's the Space Command, right? NORAD? Colorado Springs?"

"A bit further away than that," Alya whispered, more to herself than Anne.

"Further?"

"Much further."

"Oh, shit," Anne started to ramble, talking quickly, nervously. "I saw something in the *Inquirer* about some kind of alien ship that orbits Earth. It's all a bunch of bullshit, right? Some secret weapon of ours? I mean, there aren't any little green men. And what isn't near Earth?"

"Many things... which is why I'll have to take your place tomorrow."

"What!" Anne gasped. "I need that job. I can't lose it now."

Alya was silent again.

"Look, my unemployment has run out," Anne pleaded, "and I really can't lose this opportunity. My mother has been helping me, but she can't anymore because she got sick and..."

"You are going to lose more than that," Alya interrupted, feeling sorry for the woman now. "But at least you won't have to worry about money anymore."

"Like how? I'm dead broke." Anne laughed. "Hell, I guess there isn't much left to worry about. Or to lose."

"Just your life," Alya deadpanned.

"**What!?**" Anne shrieked. Swerving, she nearly ran off the road.

Alya grabbed the wheel and steadied the car in the passing lane. "Your fate is simply that of being in the wrong place at the wrong time," she said as she

reached across the car to jam her foot on the accelerator. “But I promise, this won’t hurt a bit.”

“No, oh my God, no!” Anne screamed. She jerked her foot out from under Alya’s, and jammed it down on the brake pedal, slowing the car’s acceleration. She grabbed the wheel and tried to force the car over to the shoulder, but couldn’t budge it.

The brake pedal quickly turned to mush as the V8 engine roared at full power, overheating and fading the brakes. The speedometer hit 75, and the car started to shake and swerve side to side from its misaligned and unbalanced tires.

Alya struggled to control the car, but not before she clipped the back of an 18-wheeler gasoline tanker. The car skidded for a moment before Alya righted it. The decrepit car felt more and more unstable as the speed increased, and it was soon all Alya could do to keep the car in both lanes, let alone one.

It didn’t help that Anne was flailing at her with fists and fingernails. So far, she’d succeeded only in breaking her nails and bruising her fists. Realizing it was hopeless to overpower this incredibly strong girl, she grabbed Alya’s hair, crying, screaming, fighting, and pleading, but still couldn’t budge Alya. She bruised her fists punching her face again, finally resorting to digging her remaining good fingernails into her eyes. Alya didn’t even blink.

“What the fuck are you?” Anne screamed, half in frustration, half in mortal fear. Her imagination raced away with her. “Some kind of Cyborg? A Terminator?”

Alya nodded mutely as the car reached 80. Then 90, 100. The steering wheel began to shake so violently it was little more than a blur as the car hit 110. She gritted her teeth and focused on staying on the road until she reached the next overpass. That would be the place.

Seeing Alya’s eyes narrowing, Anne gave up fighting long enough to turn back to look out the windshield. She screamed as Alya twisted the steering wheel at that moment to drop down onto the inside shoulder, veering directly toward one of the concrete pillars of the highway overpass. There were no guardrails on this older section of Interstate.

No sound came out of Anne's mouth. Her vocal chords were paralyzed with fear, her eyes wide open in horror. She could only stare helplessly at the omnipresent graffiti that some gang-member had spray-painted on the column. It featured a skull and crossbones with an upraised finger in the middle.

The car was aimed right for the finger. A finger that suddenly filled Anne's entire world.

The head-on impact with the bridge pillar at 115 miles per hour collapsed the entire car, air bags useless. The engine was propelled through the passenger compartment, tearing Anne's body apart as the front of the car was crushed all the way back to the trunk. Bits and pieces of shattered metal and plastic flew in all directions as the car was reduced to a three-foot length of crumpled steel.

Stunned and barely conscious, Alya blinked her eyes a few moments, only to find herself balled up inside the wreckage, with the hot, ticking engine in her lap. A glance with her Tachyon vision showed the car crumpled all around her, her body sprinkled with glass. The smell of blood was strong – the iron-rich smell of Terran blood. That was joined by the sweet smell of gasoline. Alya shifted her bent leg, and felt something break beneath her. The air was suddenly filled with the strong scent of perfume. The combination of scents was enough to make her gag.

Knowing she had to get away from the crash before anyone stopped to observe her miraculous survival, Alya flexed her shoulders and casually spread her arms outward. The mangled steel was tortured yet again, this time bending and scraping against concrete to send out a riot of sparks.

Alya was rewarded with an earth-shaking WHOOMF that lifted the wreckage off the ground as the spreading puddle of gasoline beneath it ignited. Reaching down to grip the engine block in her lap, her body now engulfed by the fireball, she violently tore the hot metal apart, her fingers tearing long gashes in the cast iron. Free of it now, she slowly stood up and shook herself to send glass and torn metal flying.

Her Earthly clothing was mostly gone, leaving behind the only remnants of Arion dress she'd worn under her street clothes: yellow panties, a couple of thin

black belts and a filmy, white, transparent top, open down the front and decorated with the red runes of her clan.

The initial fireball of flame died down quickly, leaving a bonfire that rose waist-high up the chimney of her long legs. Standing in the wreckage, she saw the 18-wheeler that they'd clipped a few miles back braking to a stop in cloud of rubber smoke. The driver leaped out of the cab and ran across the otherwise empty highway toward her.

Alya's eyes grew warm as he approached. Gathering her energies, she watched his eyes as they moved from the mangled wreckage of the car to the bright flames and finally to herself. She could only imagine what she must look like to him, standing in the middle of the flaming wreck, half undressed, flames wrapping around her. She let him approach until she saw another car appearing a couple of miles down the road. She could delay no longer.

A quick flash of her eyes seared his retinas, blinding him.

He screamed and clawed at his eyes, two thin streams of smoke coming from the ruined sockets. Stumbling and falling to his knees, he was suddenly overwhelmed with the scent of perfume and gasoline. A strong hand gripped the back of his belt, and then he was flying. He landed face-first in the middle of the burning wreckage, mercifully breaking his neck before he could burn to death.

Stooping down, Alya picked up a hand-sized rock, and then spun around in a credible imitation of a baseball pitcher. The thrown rock was moving much faster than the speed of sound when it punched a fist-sized hole through both sides of the gasoline tanker. Turning back to look at the burning car wreckage, Alya crossed her arms and held herself, gripping the softness of her breasts with increasing strength. She held herself tighter and tighter every second, slowly unleashing her incredible strength, her arms flexing in hard curves of steel muscle as her fingers dug into the depths of her breasts until they began to hurt. She squeezed even harder yet, gasping from pain now, pushing herself into a forced Orgone burn. It was a combat technique that all Primes are taught.

The incredible pressure and pain triggered a sudden flare of cold fusion, part of an innate self-defense mechanism, and that in turn dramatically increased the

rate of cold fusion inside her body. The pain of her grip suddenly turned sublime as a blaze of searing heat filled her hands. Her chest flared with tens of megawatts of raw power – power she channeled into her central nervous system, through superconducting nerves to flare inside her head as the power found its way down her optic nerves. Opening her blue eyes wide, she unleashed the hellish light of her heat vision.

Whatever was left of the flattened car melted like butter under a blow torch, the two bodies burning to ash as she played her heat vision back and force across the wreck. Her breasts rapidly cooled beneath her now open palms as a thirty second long burst of heat vision equalized her energy flows again, and in so doing, removed any evidence of the make and model of crashed car. Anne's car was little more than a molten blob of metal when the gasoline from the punctured tanker finally reached Alya, washing over her legs like a flooding river. It flowed past her until it reached the flames.

Five thousand gallons of unleaded gasoline spread over a 30-yard diameter suddenly ignited to envelop the entire overpass in flames. The force of the explosion lifted Alya off the ground, but she landed lightly on her feet, and turned to walk directly into the heart of the inferno, her long hair twisting wildly over her head.

Walking thirty yards up the gentle slope to reach the tanker, she ducked under it, secure and invisible inside her inferno. She reached under the twisted frame of the truck, digging her fingers deep into the glowing steel. The long muscles of her slender arms flexed hard as she dead-lifted the truck off the pavement and then over her head, teetering back and forth as she tried to balance it. Letting it tilt forward, she thrust off with her legs, running fast as she swept her arms forward, tossing the 20-ton of empty truck and trailer completely across the roadway. It landed directly on top of the melted remains of Anne's car. Then, without even as much as a backward glance, she turned and dove out from the flames to tumble down into the deep concrete drainage ditch that lined the shoulder of the Interstate.

She turned and ran away from the wreck, moving far faster than any human, her hair and filmy top flying behind her as she trailed flames twenty feet behind her. She was a mile away, the flames out, when she finally climbed out of the ditch. Looking back down the highway, she saw a small crowd of vehicles stopped around a massive cloud of black smoke that billowed out from under the distant underpass.

What a mess. The local police wouldn't have a clue, and undoubtedly the Terran newspapers would write it up as an unfortunate accident. So much the better.

She knew she could have killed the woman a hundred easier ways, even as simply as snapping her finger against her forehead to cause a fatal concussion, but it had been months since she'd really been able to get some good exercise. Stretching from side to side, she felt loose and warm and just a bit horny the way she always did after a serious workout. Now if Ram'ah was still around, she'd have someone suitable to sleep with tonight, and the day would be perfect.

"Anne Sobrosky, you died well," she said as if by way of a benediction, extending her open palms in an Arion gesture of respect. "You fought to the very end, Anne Sobrosky," trying out her new name again. "Like a true warrior. It is no dishonor to fight a warrior Prime and lose your life in the doing." She lifted her fist high and then extended it toward the burning wreck in an Arion salute. "To the contrary, it is an honor."

She spun around on her heel and resumed running through the fields parallel to the highway, her bare feet churning the dry cornstalks of Fall into a cloud of debris that rose behind her in a cloud. As she ran, she kept repeating her new name over and over.

It was a good name.

Seth Victor's Apartment

Seth lay exhausted on the couch as he watched Caitlyn finish off the second of the pizza's he'd ordered. Double pepperoni and cheese. A bag of Oreo cookies had been the first casualty of her post coitus hunger. Then a six-pack of Bud.

Then a quart of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. Finally a delivery order of Kenny Rogers ribs. With fries. She still looked hungry.

Somewhere between the Oreos and the ice cream she'd taken him out to the garage to try something kinky. She grunted as she lifted the back end of his F150 off the ground, holding the light end of his truck over her head, her legs spread wide as she encouraged him to take her from behind. He liked the feel of her muscles when they were working this hard, although she'd been almost too tight. Fortunately he'd brought the K-Y jelly with him.

She banged the back tires of his F150 down after he was done banging her, and then stretched like a ballerina to work the kinks out, apologizing as she did for only having the strength of a half dozen men. Based on the way she'd held a thousand or so pounds of F150 back end over her head while in the throes of passion, he surmised that her definition of one man-power would be someone built like Hulk Hogan.

Her hard musculature faded back to that of a pretty teenage girl as she dragged him back to the kitchen and went to work on the Ben and Jerry's.

Seth was in heaven. Caitlyn wanted nothing more in the world than eat and make love. At the same time whenever possible. Especially when ice cream was involved. Yet despite her eating binge, she didn't look as if she'd eaten for a week. Her stomach was flat as a board. On the other hand, her tousled hair and the musky scent that filled his apartment was testament to the battle of the sexes.

Caitlyn was winning that battle. Hands down. Seth could barely even find the bed now, let alone perform in it. Caitlyn solved that problem by giving the Kenny Rogers delivery man a nice tip. She ripped off his clothes and took him on the kitchen floor, all the while munching on his ribs. She made a mess, and by the time the delivery man left an hour later, barbecue sauce all over him, he was holding his side, one of his ribs cracked from her more than enthusiastic climaxes. She had very strong legs, and she loved to be on top.

Seth had been shocked by her erotic demonstration, but he'd shrugged it off, knowing Arions had strange habits. Just as long as he was always at the head of

her line, she could do as she pleased. He wouldn't admit it, but he'd secretly enjoyed watching the sexual predator in her coming out as she took the shocked deliveryman.

She was young, high school age, but she'd sure been around. He passed out around midnight while wondering if the Arions' trained their agents this way, or if this was just one of Caitlyn's natural talents.

By the time he woke up, she was gone. So, he soon discovered, was his truck. But he wouldn't miss it for long. He'd be found beaten to death a week later.

Chapter Five – Captured

By Sharon Best and Brantley

Somewhere Inside Avalon Labs

Allan and Keith couldn't remember what had happened after their car crashed.

Dazed as well as banged and bruised from the impact, despite the airbags, they had been dragged off by the Marine military police. Then someone had given them some sort of injections, and they had found themselves... here.

"Here" was a bare room with white walls. There were two metal chairs, to which they were securely shackled. In front of them was a bare metal desk, and behind that another metal chair. Seated in that chair was a thick-set, dark-haired but balding man who favored wire-rim glasses.

"I have a problem here," said the man. "Perhaps you can help me resolve it?"

"Who the hell are you?" yelled Allan.

"My name is Engelbrecht," he answered. "Not that it's any of your business. I already know your names, of course. And your business here. I'm afraid you've come a long way for nothing."

"Hey, don't we get a phone call? Don't we get a lawyer?" Keith interrupted.

"You have the right to remain silent, period. Although I hardly expect you to do so."

"Do you work for a man named Jim Caultron?" Allan asked.

"Now where would you have gotten that name? Not that it matters. Not that you matter. In fact—"

"Where's Karalyn?" Keith interrupted. "What have you done with her?"

"We're putting her on ice, so to speak," Engelbrecht said. "She has served her purpose. You might be joining her shortly. Or not. That's the problem I need your help with."

Allan wondered how they could possibly put Karalyn "on ice." Could they have discovered some way to... But before he could ponder that...

"We want to see her right now," Keith insisted.

"Well, I'm afraid that's not possible. Not without your help. And you're not helping. Why is that, Keith?"

"Why should I give you the fucking time of day?" Keith retorted.

"I can see that I'm not getting anywhere with your friend. What about you, Allan?"

"What about what?"

"That problem I was telling you about. For example, we could erase all records of your plane trip, including your mother's VISA account. Chances are nobody at Continental remembers you anyway. But then the Hertz people would still be looking for their car, and they'd consider it rather odd if we erased the rental from their database. A difficult matter, as you can see."

Allan was already pale, but he turned even paler. It was the same with Keith.

"Then again, we could take advantage of the darkness to airlift you and your car to some remote mountain road and make it appear that you had simply met your deaths simply driving off an embankment. Of course, then we'd have to find

an excuse for ensuring that the road was cleared of other traffic while we set things up. And your families would no doubt insist on trying to find out just what you were doing out there in the middle of the night to begin with. So it would again be a difficult matter, But there are still other possible scenarios. What would you advise?”

“You’re insane,” Allan said.

“Am I? Well, consider this. Two teenagers, with no experience of the world, take it into their heads to travel clear across the country and somehow break into a secure military installation. Without any kind of plan, without even the kind of knowledge on which they might be able to conceive a plan. Now I ask you, is that quite sane?”

Allan and Keith looked at each other. They hadn’t had a plan, and they didn’t have one now. But this Engelbrecht must have one, and it obviously didn’t involve their coming out of Avalon alive.

“Nothing to say for yourselves?” Engelbrecht asked when they failed to respond. “Fresh out of ideas? I suppose I’ll have to rely on my own. I have to attend to other matters now, but I’ll be back, so don’t go anywhere. And just to prove I’m not such a bad man, let me entertain you while I’m away.”

He pulled a small CD player from the desk, switched it on before he left. “A local favorite,” he informed them. “The Jersey Bounce. Very appropriate here. It’s on endless replay, so you’ll get to appreciate it.”

It was a tinny recording, with silly lyrics:

They call it the Jersey Bounce

A rhythm that really counts

The temperature always mounts

Whenever they play the funny rhythm they play

It started on Journal Square

And Somebody heard it there

They put it right on the air

And now you'll hear it everywhere.

It was torture.

Inside Laboratory A-12

Jim Caultron stared at Karalyn's body. She lay unconscious on the titanium platform in front of him.

A tear of regret moistened his cheek as he pushed the button to activate the lift to carry her silent form over to the bubbling surface of a liquid helium tank. The tank was nearly fifteen feet tall and six feet in diameter, the walls made of a thick vacuum of clear plastic and glass. He hit the Down button as he watched the titanium platform float on the surface for a few moments before the unconscious weight of Karalyn Jones' body overcame the tension of the liquefied air to submerge it. The platform tilted and quickly sank to the bottom of the tank, taking Karalyn with it.

Walking closer to the clear walls of the tall tank, Jim reached in his pocket to retrieve a handkerchief to wipe the condensation from the glass. He stared intently at the girl inside. She certainly looked as if she were dead, her eyes closed, her breathing stopped. The monitor beside him showed that she had no heart beat. Yet she was still as beautiful as ever, her blonde hair floating like a cloud around her head, her remarkable body floating weightlessly an inch off the bottom of the tank, her skin color unchanged since she stopped breathing. The liquid helium looked as clear as water as it cooled her body to a couple of degrees above absolute zero and sucked every calorie of energy from her body. Calories that she would need if she was to take another breath of air or enjoy the beat of her heart once again.

Another tear found its way down Jim's cheek as he stared at the silence of her perfect body for several minutes. He could still hear her soft whispers and her exuberant laughter as she'd thrilled both of them last night with the unleashing of the passionate power it contained. She'd cried out in joy at each of his orgasms

as he thrilled ecstatically to the barely controlled violence of hers. She was a girl who'd been born to mate with a god, yet she'd taken her pleasure with an ordinary man, pleasures that had thrilled her with sensations that she'd never known she could feel. The awakening of the silky softness and underlying steel of her young body had also restored a passion to Jim's body that he'd thought had passed him by decades before.

Now he was going to try to destroy her body and soul in his effort to prove that desperate measures were needed to save the Earth. It was his quest to prove that the Supremis race was not any more omnipotent than Karalyn Jones had been in his arms last night.

He pulled himself away from his daze, and angrily flicked his tears away as he turned back to look at the table behind him. A new wave of doubts assaulted his senses as he couldn't help but think back to the previous twenty-four hours. Was he really doing this to save the Earth, or was he simply trying to show the CIA that they'd been wrong? Even more ominously, was he trying to prove that his wife's and sister in law's deaths hadn't been in vain? Or was he just out for revenge?

Their deaths had come a few weeks after Shirley had tried to convince the Director of National Intelligence of the secret Arion influence that was already on Earth. The painful memories of the Arion chronicle his wife had procured from that strange woman in Boulder and what befell her and her sister afterwards cut into his thoughts like a knife, a hot knife that drew the long buried anger outward again. Jim Caultron uttered a vile curse on the unearthly creatures who had killed two people he'd loved.

Revenge burned the hottest and cleanest of all emotions. He was determined that the death of one of the aliens, even one as lovely as Karalyn Jones, would just be the start of the revenge he'd plotted for so many years. He was not going to leave the defense of Earth in the hands of these blonde cousins of the murderous creatures who had killed the only two people he'd loved. He knew now that only the fully armed and aware populace of Earth would defeat an Empire as great as that of Aria.

He was fighting an uphill battle. The DIA considered the Supremis to be invincible, at least to any weapon less than a large nuke. The Director had decided to try to work with them, if only to ultimately gain access to their technology. Jim knew that was a fool's errand. The aliens would use them as pawns for their own advantage.

If he could only show them that the Ultlas plus liquid helium could kill the Supremis, then the military could be armed and mobilized. He just needed some believers in the top echelon of government.

Not that he didn't have his supporters. The witnesses to his demo had included the President (officially otherwise engaged, by a double). Now, if he produced a dead body, he'd be able change the course of history.

Even if it meant killing this lovely girl. An acceptable sacrifice, he told himself, only half believing it. Reaching down to touch the metallic silver outfit and blue miniskirt that Karalyn had been wearing a few minutes before, his heart leaped as he felt her warmth still in the fabric, the flowery fragrance of her body filling the air. His visceral reaction was one he wasn't proud of. There was something about her scent that drove him wild. She was cuter than any supermodel, sexier than any centerfold, despite her young age of sixteen.

He gritted his teeth and pushed those misplaced thoughts away. She was a profoundly dangerous alien. He stuffed the filmy material of her uniform into a sack. Turning, he steeled himself as he picked up the phone and dialed a number. "I need an inorganic materials analysis in Lab A-12," he said softly. "Secure alien protocol."

He hung the phone back up as he turned to stare again at the girl who had captured his infatuation if not his heart as she floated in the stasis tank. He checked his watch. The countdown timer showed nineteen hours and ten minutes left. He picked up the red file that had been transcribed from the weapons protocols that they'd found in the 1970's Arion crash records and read the key numbers again. The document was a prescription for killing members of the Supremis race. It said that they could only survive undamaged for a period of twelve hours without a heartbeat. Beyond that, brain damage would begin. Their

memories and personality would be erased at fifteen hours, their skeletal motor reflexes at eighteen hours. At nineteen hours their automatic nervous system would start collapsing. They would be completely brain dead at twenty hours.

Nineteen hours and eight minutes to go. Jim knew that it would be an eternity. An eternity that would damn his soul to hell until the end of time itself.

"It is not that I loved you less, but that I loved Earth more," he whispered. It was a thought for himself alone. But with a start, he realized that he was no longer alone.

"I understand that the little bitch was a really hot number. Did I tell you I almost had a chance to fuck one of them myself?" It was Engelbrecht. It would have to be Engelbrecht, intruding at a moment like this, his words so vile. Jim loathed him. So did everyone else. His heart was as cold as liquid helium he worked with. But he and what he did were necessary. Just as Jim and what he did were necessary.

"She's just a girl from LA."

"Who fucked your brains out last night. We have it all on tape. Nice work, by the way. Keeping her distracted in such a manner."

"You have no god-damned right to..."

"Scheisse! You know very well that we've been watching the alien for months. Did you really think that everything would be turned off the moment you appeared?"

"You bugged my room."

"Why do you imagine that we put you up at the Lodge? The DIA owns it. As a matter of fact, it's served them quite well as a honey trap on other occasions. And when you're in a better frame of mind, James, you might enjoy that tape of yourself and your honey."

Jim clenched his fists, and said nothing.

"At least one thing's for sure... she's just another frigid woman now, eh?" Engelbrecht said in his trademark oily voice.

For Jim, it was enough to turn anguish to fury.

“You think this is just some god-damned joke? We’re committing a necessary murder to save the planet, and you think it’s a fucking joke?”

“James, dear. Necessary murders are nothing new here. It’s always hardest the first time. You’ll get used to it. Trust me. I did.”

“If you call me fucking ‘dear’ one more time, I swear... what the hell are you talking about? Used to it?”

“Surely you’ve heard the rumors? None true, according to General Graves. But true, nevertheless. I tell you this now only because you have become my partner in crime, as it were.

“You’re not my partner in anything. You’ve done your job, your only job for me, which was to ready the chamber for—”

“Ah yes, for your lovely Karalyn. She’ll make such a splendid addition to my collection. Have you ever seen my collection?”

Jim looked at him blankly.

“Of course not. You’re aren’t cleared to see it. But you’re about to be.”

Jim felt a vague wash of nausea fill him. “Is this another of your sick jokes?”

“You’re such a fool, James. A fool for love and now a fool for the State. I can see that I’m going to have to take your education in hand. Step this way.”

Jim hesitated for only a brief moment before following Engelbrecht down the hallway. He paused to squint into a retinal scanner, and the door to lab A-21 opened. Despite having worked at Avalon for years, he’d never seen anyone come or go from this lab.

Engelbrecht seemed to read his thoughts. “I normally only access this lab when the place is empty. Middle of the night. But the security alert should be keeping everyone else busy.”

The room inside was large, nearly fifty meters deep and half that in width. Arrayed along one wall were a series of the same kind of vacuum tubes that he had back in his own lab. He counted fourteen. Engelbrecht touched a switch, and lights over eight of the tube came on. Each of them had a figure inside.

“The first ET’s I took were what we call Omega-3’s. Arion Betans for those who’ve studied the archives as you have.”

Jim stared in amazement as he walked past a half dozen tubes, each containing a blue-white figure floating in the liquid helium. He paused at the seventh and gasped. Three males and four females, some of them little more than children. A blue-white figure with long raven hair floated weightlessly in the sixth tube, her eyes closed as if she was sleeping. A thin white gown provided scanty covering. A series of electrodes were attached to her chest. She was instantly recognizable.

“Sarah Everclear? My Lord, what the hell is *she* doing here?”

Sarah had been a junior program manager on Jim’s project before she’d inexplicably disappeared. The police had searched for her for three months without success.

“Deep implant agent,” Engelbrecht shrugged. “Look at them all. The Arion bastards put them on Earth as children, their minds programmed, waiting for triggering instructions. The Betans don’t even know what they are until they get activated.”

“So you kill them? Without telling anyone?”

“Of course. Just like you are so intent on doing to your honey. It’s how we learn.”

“I had to get approval from the highest authority for my work. The highest.”

“As did I, James my boy, as do I. We’ve been freezing these freaks down here for more than ten years now.”

“*Ten years?*”

“Did you really imagine you were going to be the first to work on this problem? Are you really that naïve? I was at Area 51 long before your project here was sanctioned.”

Jim was silent for a moment, taking it all in.

“Why wasn’t I told any of this?”

“You’ve been working in the equivalent of a cubicle. We have a number of such research cubicles at this installation. Some of them have overlapping functions, but the whole point is to limit their contacts with one another – without them even becoming aware of their isolation.”

“Only now I *am* aware. So clue me in. How did you manage to get a sanction to kill off one of the employees at Avalon?”

I got a sanction to take out a very dangerous ET. Despite bringing in a Delta Force team, she killed two men when we tried to take her. Twisted one man’s neck half way around to break his neck. And she put her foot through a soldier’s chest. They are fucking strong and fast as cats. But then, you know that first-hand, now don’t you?”

“Now this is my very favorite,” Engelbrecht chortled, “the closest to your girl. I caught her several years ago.”

A raven-haired woman stared back at them with ghostly pale blue eyes, wide-open, her skin color a washed out bluish-white. Her hair swirled around her head in the shifting currents of liquid helium.

Her lips were full, her eyes unusually large and clear, her featured more refined than the others. Even in death, she was profoundly beautiful. His heart pounded as he stared into her lifeless eyes, his hackles rising as he realized how deceptive her beauty was. She was a woman with Karalyn’s physical powers, yet her kind were dedicated to bringing death and destruction to anyone human.



“A Prime! But... how? I’ve never read anything that suggested that anyone else had managed to subdue one. It shouldn’t be possible.”

“Normally, I’d agree. But you’re not the only man who can appeal to a girl’s emotions. And besides, do you really think I’d be allowed to publish my work? That I’d be fool enough to show it to anyone outside the inner circle? There are only a half dozen people on the planet who can appreciate what I do. You’re one of them, James. You should be honored.”

Jim ignored Engelbrecht’s arrogance.

“But we could have used your technique, your weapon, to equip soldiers to engage and defeat the Supremis. Could have stopped the killings long ago.” He thought of Shirley... she might have been saved. His thoughts raced, imagining a division of soldiers with weapons that could stop a Supremis. He tried not to focus on the obvious.

Engelbrecht did. “What you really mean, could I have stopped your wife’s killer? Well, I did. You’re looking at her.”

Jim’s legs suddenly felt weak, and he staggered backward to lean against a table. He was mesmerized by the shocked look on the woman’s face as she floated in the tank, her body only a few degrees above absolute zero. His lips formed but one incredulous word. “Her?”

Engelbrecht nodded, unable to suppress a smile at the way Jim stared at her. He could only imagine the emotions going through his head.

“And she’s... really dead. Now?”

“Twenty-four hours is about all they last. I’ve had her in my collection now for some time.”

“When did you... and how did she... my wife I mean?”

“You don’t want to know the how. But the when was about ten days after she killed your wife. I have to tell you, she was acting on her own. Outside our control. Shirley was talking about too many things to too many people. She was getting out of control. It might have even reached Congress. Something about a Prime Directive, Teza said. She said she had no choice.”

“And you believed her?”

"Of course not. That's why we accelerated our program to find a weapon. That's when we hired you."

"I want to know how she died, Engelbrecht," Jim shouted angrily.

Engelbrecht shook his head. "It's best if some secrets die with her."

"No, god damn it, you've hidden this secret for so long. You owe me." Jim's emotions were swirling. He'd thought he was past the pain. He wasn't. "And what... what happened to my wife's body?"

"Cremated. Government took care of it."

"And you didn't tell me. You knew all the time. All of you."

"It was classified way above your level, James. We were trying to get control of the Prime again. We couldn't risk anyone else becoming involved."

"But after you froze this bitch..."

"It's still classified. The difference is that you've now paid your dues enough to join our little group. You've killed your Supremis." He glanced at his watch. "Or will have in a bit less than nineteen hours."

"I asked you how my wife died." Jim's voice was low, almost a growl.

Engelbrecht hesitated for a long moment, looking back into the angry, determined look in Jim's eyes. He sighed. Anyone else would have shown compassion, but he fairly smirked before answering Caultron.

"It happened as she walked up the steps of the Capital. She was going to see a... certain senator. The Prime walked up behind her, and as they passed behind one of those pillars, she put her hand, fingers outstretched, on your wife's head, thumb and middle fingers pressing on the anterior lobes."

Engelbrecht shrugged as if he was describing a play in last weekend's football game.

"A typical Arion killing hold. They call it the 'Zay'wet', I've been told. Whatever it's called, they apply just enough pressure with their grip to fracture the skull and cause a massive bleed."

Engelbrecht stopped there. He'd seen video of another Primal kill. The victim there fell to the ground, totally incapacitated, arms and legs thrashing in

excruciatingly painful spasms. For all the world it looked like he was in an epileptic seizure, except that he never recovered.

Jim leaned over and vomited, barely finding a wastebasket in time. His stomach spasmed again and again as the horrifying image of his wife's face swam before his eyes, her skull crushed, her eyes half bulging out of their sockets, her brain in the midst of being destroyed by a massive hemorrhage.

"Which is why we had to cremate her body. You'd have to run a truck tire over someone's head to cause that kind of injury."

"Somebody had to pick up the body. Clear things with the Capitol police."

"She was being shadowed by... friends of ours. Friends with the right credentials."

"And they did nothing to stop it?"

"But James, what *could* they have done?"

Something about what he was hearing didn't quite add up, but Jim didn't want to think about it. He straightened up and wiped his lips on his sleeve. His thoughts were filled with contempt for this man. This monster.

He caught himself. There was still his duty. His job. The job of killing the aliens before they killed again. If he reacted emotionally here, he'd lose his chance at the inner circle. "But if you proved you can kill one of them, Engelbrecht, then why don't we have a weapon deployed? We could mass produce them and deliver them to..."

Engelbrecht waved his hand to stop him. "Trust me, James, the technique I employed to capture this lovely isn't applicable to combat situations. In contrast, your approach is most innovative. It will be far more useful."

"I don't understand... you've already accomplished what I'm working on now. What difference my work make if you discovered a solution years before me."

"Let's just say that my weapon has a range problem."

"Then how..."

Engelbrecht turned to stare at the lifeless face in the vacuum vessel. "She was a deserter from the Arion cause. Working for us. So confident in her powers, she was. So arrogant. So superior in her attitudes. She was negotiating to have

us give her Europe in exchange for working for us. She wanted to set herself up as some kind of dark queen.”

“No one has the authority to do that.”

“I think she figured that out after a bit. We think she was going to try to take the continent on her own. She was convinced that no weapon on Earth could possibly harm her.

Caultron looked at the frozen woman floating in the vacuum tube. “She was wrong. Obviously.”

“Don’t discount her. She had good reason to be so arrogant. I had to use an Arion weapon to put her down. Very small, about the size of a cigar with a burst heat approximating a nuclear explosive. Very dangerous.”

“Even that can’t kill an empowered Supremis. Karalyn proved that when she survived that underground nuke. That one was a city-killer.”

“There is a way, one that this young woman, I definitely won’t call her a lady, tried to shock me with.” He paused as if deciding how much to say. Jim was the one person he needed to secrets between. “Well, James, let’s just say, she took it internally. She was so intent on demonstrating that it would be ineffective. That even such intimate territory was completely invulnerable.”

“Inside her...” Jim’s voice trailed off.

“They are such exhibitionists, these Supremis. That is their true weakness.”

Jim stared incredulously at the woman’s nude body.

“She’d seduced me with those pheromones of hers, marching me around like a pet on a leash. Then, when I proved inadequate to satisfy even her simplest sexual needs, she felt she had to show me the power that was required to truly please her.”

“Jesus.”

“Her Arion pride got the best of her. The burst of that weapon, which was 99% contained by her body, still vaporized a hangar and left a shallow crater fifty yards wide. The resulting dozens, hell hundreds, of machine-gun orgasms that wracked her body left her unconscious in the middle of a puddle of molten Ferro-concrete. Fortunately, I had the liquid helium waiting.”

“She sacrificed herself? Just to show you how inadequate you were?”

Engelbrecht laughed. “Of course not, my dear boy. She would have recovered from her prideful demonstration in a matter of minutes. That was all part of her degenerate demonstration of her ultimate sexuality. An arrogant demonstration I turned to my own advantage.” He turned to look at the pale blue figure. “Just look at the marvelous expression in her eyes, James. She was in the vat for more than an hour before she awoke. By that time we’d drawn enough of her power away that she wasn’t strong enough to break the crystal. In the end, I was the one with the true power, as I took the gift of life from her.”

Engelbrecht was beside himself with pride as he showed off his favorite specimen. “She could only stare at me as the helium slowly sucked the last energy from her body. For more than twenty hours, she floated there, not believing I would truly take the life of a perfect being such as herself. Of a goddess. She died with that expression on her face... her lethal perfection and her arrogant disbelief captured forever. Jim found himself mesmerized by the Prime’s startled look, and then sickened. He tried not to think of her helplessly freezing to death.

“Just look at those eyes, Jim. Incredible. To think she could look through things, that she could melt steel, even concrete with their heat. What an incredible specimen.”

Then he noticed the look on Jim’s face.

“You look ill,” he said. “Is it merely the chill in the air, or are you coming down with something?”

“No, it’s just that...”

“I understand. It’s a period of adjustment for you. Shall we continue our discussion in the morning? I have another matter I need to attend to just now.”

Does the man never sleep? Jim wondered. But he was glad of the chance to get away from this chamber of horrors.

Chapter Six – Arkady Klimenko

By Sharon Best and Brantley

Arkady Klimenko had been born at the wrong place and the wrong time. The place was Smolensk and the time 1956. It should have been a good time to be born in Russia: Khrushchov had just denounced Stalin, and a year later the Soviet Union would beat the Americans into space.

Only, by the time Klimenko completed intermediate education at 13, Brezhnev was already putting an end to the Thaw, and the Soviets had lost the race to the Moon. By the time he graduated from Moscow's Bauman Higher Technical School at 19, the Soviet Union had entered its long twilight, although it wasn't obvious at first. Even to Klimenko.

When he joined the research staff at RKK Energiya, he was full of ideas. One of them was artificial hibernation. Klimenko was convinced that this would be absolutely necessary for long interplanetary flights. Not only would it save on food and water and oxygen, but it would also eliminate the inevitable boredom of journeys lasting for months on end.

Nobody paid much attention. There were other priorities. But with Salyut 7, surely his chance would come. There was plenty of funding. The Soviets still had the best rockets in the world, no matter what the Americans said. They could be launched in a blizzard, when a drizzle in Florida would be enough to scrub a mission there. And Russia had the best space station – the *only* space station, after the Americans threw theirs away.

It wasn't like back in the 1920's, when the first Russian space flight enthusiasts couldn't get support from the Soviet government. They'd organized a club called GIRD – *Grupa po Izucheniyu Reaktivno Dvizhenia*, or Group For the Study of Reaction Engines. But people made fun of it and said it should have been called *Grupa Inzhenerov, Rabotayushchikh Darom* – Group of Engineers, Working for Nothing.

But after six years, things had gone sour for Klimenko. Instead of letting it concentrate on its strengths, Moscow had pressured Energiya into wasting its substance on the Buran, a vain attempt to duplicate the Space Shuttle. Klimenko had foreseen that project would go nowhere. He objected loudly, continually and truth be told petulantly. So much so that by 1984, he was out of a job.

In that same baneful year, he left for the United States, amazing even himself by obtaining an exit visa. Nobody there was interested in artificial hibernation either; but through contacts made in 1977 during the Apollo-Soyuz mission, he managed to get a post at NASA, which was looking into adopting Russian technology for a new generation of boosters.

Nothing ever came of that, at least not while Klimenko was on staff. What was more, he managed to get himself in trouble again by complaining about the safety hazards of the solid fuel boosters used in the shuttle program, and going on about the superiority of Russian technology. Several American colleagues invited him rather pointedly to go back where he came from. Then came Jan. 28, 1986: the *Challenger* disaster.

Far from vindicating him, this event caused his critics at NASA to resent him all the more. He could still remember an angry confrontation with some deputy chief.

"Klimenko, get with the program," the man had insisted.

"I *am* with the program," Klimenko had responded just as strongly.

"I don't think you even know the name of the program. So I'll spell it out for you: T-H-I-O-K-O-L."

"Thiokol? You should fuck Thiokol. They have blood on their hands.

"Fuck you, Klimenko. We work with Thiokol. You want to work here, you work with Thiokol. A lot of jobs depend on Thiokol. So do some key votes in the Senate. You talk about fucking Thiokol, you're the one that's going to get fucked."

He hadn't been fucked. He hadn't exactly been fired, but they'd made things unpleasant for him by exiling him to a remote office and saddling him with shit jobs. It went on like this for two years, until one of his few friends took pity on him

and gave him a heads up about a job opening at Avalon, one which piqued his interest.

It wasn't artificial hibernation, exactly, but it did involve research in a related area of cryogenics. The pay would be considerably greater than he was presently making, but it was at a military lab, and he would have to work under extremely tight security. No publicity, no technical papers in prestigious journals. Any work there would be top secret.

There were his young wife and their two children to consider. Living was expensive in America, more expensive than he had ever imagined. And he had to think of future college costs for the children, which would have been free in the USSR. Anyway, he was used to working under secrecy in his homeland. So being a Russian, strangely, wasn't necessarily a disadvantage, or even a barrier to clearance.

But when he got to Avalon, he discovered that there was clearance and... clearance. His duties were mainly testing cryogenic chambers and their support systems and other housekeeping tasks. They assigned him an overweight, balding and somewhat slovenly cryo-tech named Seth Vickers. Max Engelbrecht, for whom he took an instant dislike from his resemblance to the infamous Lavrenti Beria, was in charge of the actual research, and Klimenko wasn't on the need-to-know list for the details.

The official story was that the aim of the cryogenics project was to devise a way to freeze wounded soldiers on the battlefield – soldiers who had suffered wounds so severe that they would otherwise be fatal. Klimenko was dubious; even if the research here could overcome the problem of ice crystallization, he couldn't see how it would ever be practical to operate cryogenic chambers under battlefield conditions. He broached the idea that artificial hibernation would actually be more feasible, but was abruptly rebuffed.

The experiments Klimenko witnessed all involved pigs and sheep, and he didn't like what he saw. They were either dead on attempted revival or suffered such severe motor damage that they had to be put down. Engelbrecht insisted that they were making progress, but Klimenko couldn't see it... And then there

were the whispers, hints of human experimentation in one of the sections closed to him.

Vickers, who seemed to have a higher clearance than himself despite his menial status, insisted any such reports were absurd, but seemed to protest a bit too much – especially when he warned him never to mention anything about that to Engelbrecht. For all his outward show of loyalty, moreover, he also seemed to have some sort of grudge against the Director of Special Projects.

There were hints of other sinister things at Avalon, too; of secret weapons being tested, deep underground where people from his section never ventured. One day, Klimenko came to see Engelbrecht and found him in deep discussion with a man he'd never seen before and who surely had nothing to do with the cryogenics lab. When Engelbrecht noticed Klimenko, he gave him a sharp order to get out of the office and come back in an hour.

An aide in the hall whispered a bit of advice in his ear: "Never bother Max when he's meeting with Weapons."

Engelbrecht had been livid when he did meet with Klimenko later. Record-keeping errors at the lab; that was what he talked about, but it seemed to be only an excuse. And if there had been any errors, they were by Vickers, who wasn't carrying his weight in the metaphorical as opposed to the physical sense. Klimenko suspected by now that the fat man's only real job was to keep an eye on him. But he didn't mention that, let alone anything about weapons.

Weapons? That scared Klimenko. But what actually scared him worse was that Engelbrecht was all smiles most of the time. He never seemed to be fazed by the failure of his experiments, or the suffering they must have caused the test animals. Could the man actually be *happy*?

All this came back to him on what was to be, although he didn't know it yet, his day of reckoning, his day of testing, a day when all hell was about to break loose, and he was about to come face to face with the gates of hell.

He had been running late, completing routine analysis of the latest test results with animal subjects – Engelbrecht had insisted on it for reasons known only to him – when the border around his computer screen turned red with black

bars. The words Security Alert – Area Lockdown in Effect scrolled across the top of his screen.

One of those routine tests of the system, programmed by a random number generator. Damn it!

Arkady slumped back in his chair. Damn it, he wasn't going to get home in time for the birthday dinner he'd planned for his wife. He picked up the phone. No dial tone. A Level Three exercise. He cursed again.

Sometimes working at the Avalon Laboratory was worse than his old job in the Soviet Union.

When Klimenko had taken his first post-University job, at RKK Energiya his supervisor Ivan Churygin – a grizzled veteran who had worked under the great Sergei Korolyov himself – had taken him aside.

“Arkady Natanovich, I tell you the most important thing. I tell you this once and for all, and you must remember: we are building Socialism here, and all our work must be dedicated to that end. Our country and our Party depend on us. Do you understand?”

“I understand, Comrade Churygin,” Klimenko said.

“Good,” said Churygin. “Now you can forget about all that and get back to work.”

It was a lesson well learned. One that, although he could not foresee it at the time, would one day serve him well in a distant land.

He looked at the desk top picture of his wife, and missed her already.

His wife was named Tanya. It was a good Russian name, but she was not Russian. She was a dark-skinned African American from Alabama he'd met at NASA. He called Tanya his dark chocolate. They had two daughters; these were called the milk chocolates, but only at home.

He'd never known any black people in Russia, although there'd been some: foreign students, mostly. Tanya had met a number of Russians in the course of her work, but she didn't know any Russian. More importantly, she hadn't met any Russians who shared her love of jazz. That made Klimenko different. They listened to classics of Thelonius Monk and Miles Davis together on their first date, and she started to learn a little Russian on the sly.

Not much, but enough to startle him one night. They'd hugged and kissed a lot after a few dates, but hadn't slept together. Klimenko had worried about offending her; American women didn't want to be considered "easy," he'd been told. Therefore he was startled but pleased that night when she'd said, "Lezhi s mnoi, pozhaluista" *Lie with me, please*.

He was even more pleased by her *krasivoye telo* (beautiful body). After a few more nights, they were both saying, "Ya lyublyu tebya." They were married that weekend. When the children came she, unlike many American women, wanted to spend her time with them. That meant making some sacrifices; it also made the higher-paying job at Avalon Labs a lot more attractive. A job that only once in a while reminded him of the reasons he left Russia.

He walked across the empty lab to a small refrigerator and took out a Pepsi. If only he'd gone home as usual at 5 p.m., they'd be on their way to her birthday party at Michelangelo's. Instead, he was probably going to be locked in until morning, with Tanya worried about him.

Like any good Russian, he suffered the random Security alerts in silence. He wanted to be home to his wife and kids.

Engelbrecht's Office

Those boys. They had to be killed, of course, and they had to be killed tracelessly. Should he add them to his collection? They hardly seemed worth the trouble. One had to maintain some sort of standards, after all.

It was the middle of the night. Still plenty of time to dispose of the rental car. Should they load it on a truck and carry it to some remote site and make it

appear that it had crashed there? But then there were the bullet holes. Security could police the rounds, but how to explain the holes?

Hah, of course! A carjacking. Common enough in Newark, where they'd picked up the car. Only the criminals had run afoul of others of their kind and had to make a fast getaway under fire. Naturally, they'd have disposed of the boys somewhere along the way, then gotten drunk and crashed the car. Perfect.

They could dump the boys' bodies somewhere else – and then arrange a phony crash scene with the car further out towards the Pennsylvania line. The car would be found right away, of course, but it would be days – maybe weeks or months – before anyone came across the bodies. It would go down as just another unsolved crime.

Engelbrecht calmly took out his keys and opened the lower drawer of his desk. He drew out a vial marked with Cyrillic characters, and a small hypodermic needle. One of the great medical achievements of the late USSR had been Phenburonar, which caused fatal heart arrhythmias. It metabolized so fast that it couldn't be detected in any post mortem. The perfect killing agent.

He drew ten cc's into the syringe and capped it, finally slipping it into a pocket of his coat. He was acting quite properly, conforming to the sanctions of Project Botany Bay. Those sanctions prescribed that anyone outside the project who had encountered an alien and who had witnessed its powers must be silenced. Nixon himself had signed the order when he'd created the Project. It was a sanction Engelbrecht had used dozens of times.

And after I'm through with them, I'll have to deal with Caultron, he thought.

He walked out of his office again and headed for the holding room.

James Caultron's Office

Jim actually had been sick. As soon as he got back to his own place, he had to run for the john and vomit again. When he had emptied his guts, he felt weak; he could barely stand. His mind was racing, out of control, and what his mind was telling him...

It couldn't be true, what he had put together in his head after Engelbrecht had told how Shirley died. But it *could* be true. The Arion Prime had been under surveillance; they must have realized what she was about to do. But what if they'd known all along – what if Shirley's killer had been acting *under orders*?

Engelbrecht's orders?

It all fit. It all fit. After what he'd seen tonight, he wouldn't put anything past the Director of Special Projects. Shirley had been a threat to the secrecy of his project, even though she hadn't known anything about it. Brenda had been a warning, a warning that he and his wife had misread as coming from the enemy Arions. And his surprise transfer from Fort Dietrick to here – had it been just to keep him under surveillance, to keep him under control? At the very least, it had been to channel his hatred for the Supremis in the very direction Engelbrecht had wanted.

Engelbrecht had gotten what he wanted – a weapon that could destroy the Supremis. What use did the man have for him now? His anger turning to fear, he realized that everything that had gone down between them tonight might be a charade.

If he wanted to stay alive, he'd have to think on his feet...

First stop was at the medical station, to find a defibrillator. Then he headed for the firing range, telling the guard there that he needed to pick up some test results. That he did, but he also palmed a Glock 31. It was small enough to fit under the defibrillator in its carrying case. He came out waving a CD.

As he'd hoped, the guard there didn't check the case. Neither did the one at Lab A-12. Jim stood again beside the thermo-glass, after setting down the defibrillator.

A quick glance at the EEG showed that Karalyn's brain activity was slowing slightly, but the flurry of electrical impulses indicated that she was dreaming. Probably a nightmare given what he had done to her treating her. Switching on the light that sat above the cryo-cylinder, he stared at her nude form as she floated in the dimly-lit container. Despite the racing EEG traces, she looked so silent, yet so perfect. He could fairly see the energy being sucked from her body,

the pale eddies of escaping Orgone reaching outward like tentacles as her life-force was hungrily absorbed by the liquid helium. Her skin was still pink, but he knew that it was only a matter of time before she was bluish-white like the other specimens.

Specimens.

He shuddered. The word made him think of Engelbrecht and his chamber of horrors. How was he different from that monster? Engelbrecht claimed he'd killed in the name of democracy. He'd said he was working to protect the Earth, the United States, every country.

Only now Jim had to protect himself...

Klimenko's Office

After the Alert expired, Arkady Klimenko finished up his work on the animal tests, then dutifully attempted to reach Engelbrecht to brief him.

But the Director of Special Projects was not in his office, nor in Lab A-05, where animal experiments were conducted. He noticed Marine guards at Labs A-12 and A-21; he'd never had clearance for those, and the guards refused to tell whether Engelbrecht was in either of them, or where else he might be found, advising him to go back where he came from.

Klimenko was doing just that when the sound of music caught his attention. It was some really cheesy tune, and it came from behind the door of an unmarked office. It was so incongruous that he couldn't resist taking a look inside.

Such are the vagaries of fate.

Through the door, Klimenko could see two young men shackled to chairs. Engelbrecht hovered over them, a syringe in his hand. He was clearly going to plunge it into one of the boys. A horrifying story like those he'd been told about KGB interrogations seemed to be unfolding in front of him. Without thinking, he made a decision that would change his life forever.

"What is happening here?" he asked.

“Nothing of any concern to you,” Engelbrecht snapped. “Get out.”

“He’s going to kill us,” one of the young men cried in a panicky voice. Engelbrecht set the syringe down on the desk and silenced him with his fist. The sickening wet snap of fist against skin and bone filled the room.

“He had my sister kidnapped,” the other shouted, realizing that the man in the doorway was their last hope. “He’s—”

Engelbrecht struck again, knocking him senseless. He turned to face Klimenko. “These men are terrorists,” he said calmly. “I am interrogating them. You have no business here. Close the door behind you.”

The Director turned off the cheesy music, then turned away.

Klimenko hesitated. Instead of leaving, he stepped further into the room. “Shouldn’t this be handled by Security?” he asked. He saw the boy’s faces clearly for the first time. “Aren’t they awfully young for terrorists?”

“This is a matter of the highest clearance, beyond that granted to Security officers, and certainly beyond yours. But those officers are cleared to deal with you, and indeed they will. Get out of here or you’re finished.”

“So call them. Let them decide.” Klimenko barely believed his own ears. What had he just said? His blood ran cold. He’d just challenged the Director. He’d asked to get involved with Security. Anathema back in the USSR, or even the new Russia.

“What?” fumed Engelbrecht. “*Do you know who I am?*”

“I said call them,” Klimenko repeated stubbornly. His father had given him one piece of simple advice when he was a child: if you dive into cold water, swim like hell. “Right *now*. Or I will,” he added.

The briefest of worried looks crossed Engelbrecht’s face, but it was enough to tell Klimenko that he had an edge here, although he couldn’t imagine what it was. Engelbrecht must have sensed it, too. Beads of sweat formed across his brow; he was losing it.

“Idiot!” he screamed. “Do have any idea what I could do to you? What I could do to Tanya, or those precious milk chocolates of yours? I could send my Primes against them!”

Time came to a stop. Engelbrecht and the prisoners seemed to be frozen in place as Klimenko's mind absorbed the import of those words – words that should be known only to himself and Tanya. That this man – this monster – knew of his endearments for the children could mean only that his life had been violated. If that was true, then he and those behind him were capable of anything, and held nothing sacred.

At that moment, the first youth came to, and saw Klimenko facing Engelbrecht.

“He’s had her put in some sort of chamber,” he gasped. “My sister. He’s going to freeze her—”

The kid started coughing blood, but Klimenko's mind was still racing. He could put it together. He'd heard the whispers about cryo-tubes, people frozen in them. Whispers that he was now certain must be true.

“Urod!” he shouted in Russian. This time the wet smack was his own fist, striking the face of the “Monster.” Engelbrecht's wire-rim glasses flew from his face as he slumped back against the wall. Klimenko was like a man possessed, his fists flying as he continued to batter Engelbrecht. It was as if they had minds of their own.

Engelbrecht's face had been a mask of terror and disbelief at first, but was soon beyond all expression. The monster flailed with his arms, clutched at his attacker, trying to beat him off, push him off. He reached for the hypodermic on the desk. Klimenko brushed it away, and grabbed him by the throat, smashing his head against the wall. It was only when Engelbrecht slipped from his grasp and fell to the floor, that Klimenko came back to himself.

“He has... must have the keys,” the first youth coughed. “We can still... save her.”

How could anyone be saved from one of the tubes? They were filled with liquid helium. In all his years of research, he'd never been able to revive an animal. It would be the same with a human. Klimenko couldn't tell him that. He'd never understand. On the other hand, maybe they hadn't filled the chamber yet...

He bent down to search Engelbrecht's pockets, despite the pain of his hands, and retrieved a ring of keys. Then he released the boys. They were still groggy, barely able to stand.

"I'm Allan Jones," one announced. "Karalyn's my sister."

"Keith Roberts. I love her. You've got to help us."

"Please—" Jones began.

Only to be cut off by the hooting blare of alarms, interrupted only by the announcement of a Top Emergency.

Somebody must have seen me, thought Klimenko. *They must be coming for me.*

He closed the door to the interrogation room, hoping against hope that they wouldn't find him.

"We can't stay here," Allan cried. "We've got to get to Karalyn."

"We wouldn't get ten feet past the door," Klimenko moaned. "I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do. Nothing anybody can do."

Maybe it was the sound of the alarms, but Engelbrecht came to at that very moment.

The Director looked at the boys, and at him.

"You're dead. All of you are dead. Depend on it."

"Shut up, you bastard, unless you want to be the first to go."

He could do it. He could still do it. But what if the men behind him decided to take it out on Tanya, or the children? He couldn't save himself. He couldn't save Allan and Keith. He couldn't save this Karalyn they were talking about. But there was still hope that he could save his family. They didn't know anything about this.

He could at least put up a brave front.

"Cuff him," he told the boys. They eagerly complied, hauling him into one of the chairs before shackling him.

At that very moment, another man burst through the door. His badge identified him as James Caultron, his unit as Special Weapons Engineering. This was the man he'd seen with Engelbrecht one day. He'd seen him again in the

hallways now and again, and avoided making eye contact. Caultron had two Marine MPs with him.

“What the hell is going on here?” he asked Klimenko.

* * *

Now for the bluff of bluffs... Jim hurried from Lab A-12 to the Security office. Half a dozen Military Police were on duty there, headed by a major.

“I must see Director Engelbrecht at once,” he said excitedly. “There is a serious breach of security, one that threatens the very survival of this installation.”

“Director Engelbrecht left word that he was not to be disturbed tonight,” said the major, whose badge gave his name as Willis.

“His life is in danger,” Jim insisted. “All our lives are in danger. You must sound an alarm, and we must find the Director before it’s too late.”

Major Willis agreed to come with him, detailing one of the other MPs as a backup. Then he switched on the alarm, with its pre-recorded message:

This is not a drill. This is a Top Emergency. All personnel other than Security are required to remain in their quarters or places of work until further notice.

* * *

And so Jim came to find Engelbrecht. But now that he’d found him, he was going to have to improvise again.

“What the hell is going on here?” he asked Klimenko.

“He was about to poison those two boys, and threatened to do the same to me,” said Klimenko. “I had to fight him off. The man’s crazy.”

“Arrest that man,” Engelbrecht yelled from his chair. “Caultron, too. They’re traitors. I’ve suspected them both for a long time.”

“Major Willis, I regret that I found it necessary to mislead you as to the true nature of the Emergency,” Jim said calmly. “It is necessary for me to inform you at this time that Director Engelbrecht himself is the traitor – and a murderer. I can show you the proof.”

“Lies!” shouted Engelbrecht.

“Then you will not object to accompanying Major Willis and his men to Laboratory A-21?”

“You have no authority!” Engelbrecht said, a panicky edge to his voice.

“Everyone here is subject to lawful authority,” Jim pressed him. “Shall we call the Provost Marshall’s office?”

“I don’t understand any of this,” said Major Willis.

“Look around you. You can see that these young men have been subjected to physical abuse. I was informed that they came here yesterday trying to find their sister, claiming that she had been kidnapped and abused. I investigated and found this indeed to be the case. The Director hoped to force them to change their story under torture and, failing that, to do away with them and dispose of the bodies as he had those of his other victims – whom you will soon find in his lab.”

“Don’t believe him!” Engelbrecht wailed. “He’s an enemy of the State. An enemy of the State!”

“Major Willis, I can assure you that Engelbrecht himself is the enemy. What you see with your own eyes will vindicate me – and you. But because Laboratory A-21 can be accessed only by retinal scan, you will need *his* eyes for that. You will have further proof when you have the contents of his hypodermic analyzed.

Shades of the movie *Apocalypse Now*, he thought to himself. He handed the hypodermic to Willis, then slipped into the voice he’d used when he himself had been a Marine gunnery sergeant.

“This is the United States of America, soldier – not fucking Russia or Iran. Log that hypodermic as evidence.”

“Yes, sir!” Willis said, as if Jim were a commanding officer. He held the needle as if it was some kind of snake. “I’ll call more MPs to see to it.”

The major got on his walkie-talkie.

“What about Karalyn?” Allan pleaded. He’d kept his silence during the face-off, but now...

“We’ll get to that,” Jim assured him.

More MPs came on the double. One of them had an evidence bag for the hypodermic.

Jim nodded to Klimenko, who gave the keys to Willis, and let Major Willis unshackle Engelbrecht.

“Dr. Klimenko, I think that it’s best you return to your office,” he said. “I’ll take things from here.”

Then he addressed Willis. “You can proceed now.”

Engelbrecht no longer seemed to have the energy to protest. Willis and one of the other MP’s frog-marched him to Lab A-21.

Jim turned again to the remaining Marine guards.

“I’m taking these young men to Lab A-12. I believe that the girl Karalyn is being held there, and I need them to ID her. It’s a very delicate situation, as I’m sure you can understand, so I hope you can afford them some privacy.”

“We’ll remain outside,” said the sergeant Major Willis had left in charge.

“I’ll go in first. For their sake. I wouldn’t want them to see...”

“I understand.”

Chapter Seven – End of Life?

By Sharon Best and Brantley

Inside Laboratory A-12, just past midnight

Time to face the music.

Jim accessed the air-lock door, and motioned to Allan and Keith, who shuffled into the lab. The remaining Marine guards stood stiffly outside.

Allan wasted no time. "O.K., man, where is she? My sister?"

Jim forced himself to sit down slowly in his lab chair, and swiveled it around to face him. "First, tell me about your sister, Allan. What makes her so special?"

"She's in here. Right?"

Jim said nothing.

"Based on the entry in her diary," Allan said darkly, "something about wearing her uniform to meet you, I think you know what you need to know about my sister."

"Your step-sister, you mean. How long have you known that she was... special."

Allan took a sharp breath, and looked over at Keith.

"You know what I mean," Jim said. "Does Keith know? He'll have to know now that she's a Velorian."

"What's a Velorian?" Keith asked innocently.

"An alien," Jim said matter-of-factly.

Keith laughed. "Get real man, she's just a California girl from Oceanside. She was born in LA."

"You don't understand anything, do you?"

"What's to understand?" Keith continued angrily. "That you're all a fucking bunch of mad scientists doing God knows what to Allan's sister? I don't need to understand any more than that. If Karalyn came here, then she's in some serious shit. And I'm thinking you're part of that same shit, just like that crazy man Engelbrecht."

"And what do you have to say, Allan?"

"She is who she is," he demurred.

"Anything else?"

"There's two of us and one of you. Now where the hell is she? We want her back, and we'll do whatever it takes."

"You can have her back. But you have a choice."

"What kind of choice?" Allan asked cautiously.

"Never to speak, even to your family and friends, about what happened here. I can't protect you otherwise. I don't know if I can even protect myself. Not that it matters. But she does. She matters to me, although I know you're going to find that hard to believe."

"Try me," Allan said.

Keith could only stare in puzzlement.

Klimenko's Office

They should have arrested me, Klimenko thought. I should be under arrest.

He had nearly killed Engelbrecht. He'd assumed that the Weapons man, Caultron, would send Security after him. He had waited for them, but nobody had come. Nobody seemed to be interested.

There was some sort of power struggle going on here, like in the old Soviet Union where Valentin Glushko had had Korolyov sent to Siberia during the Great Patriotic War. But Korolyov had been brought back when the Socialist Motherland needed him, and later led the triumphs of its space program. But some said that Glushko had hated him, and that Korolyov's death hadn't been only a matter of botched surgery...

Who was playing Korolyov's role here, and who Glushko's? What did it matter? He was caught in the middle, and for his own sake he had to hope that Caultron would come out on top, even if Engelbrecht had more pull where it really counted: the Pentagon, he supposed. The connections would have to go that high to sanction what was going on here.

He should be feeling something that he wasn't feeling: guilt, remorse. He should be sick, he told himself, vomiting his guts out. But he felt none of these things. He felt only very numb, and very tired, and very lonely. He should have been at home by now with Tanya and Olga and Defotha. Would he ever see them again?

Would he even live to see the dawn?

They killed people in this place, he knew that now. Killed them for no reason – none that he could understand. Why would Engelbrecht kill that boy's sister, or the boys themselves? Who were these Primes he had talked about, anyway? Some sort of inner circle, a fascist elite that Engelbrecht had answered to? Whoever they were, they'd be coming after him – sooner or later.

The place was insane, or else he was insane. It was even worse than that Russian lab in the Urals where radiation had gotten loose and the Soviets had

covered it up – as they hadn't been able to cover up Chernobyl years later. He couldn't sort it out. He'd always been able to sort things out. And if thinking didn't work, action did, one of his old instructors had told him that.

Without willing it, he'd found himself getting up, walking out of his office. His eyes registered that there were still guards posted at the entrance to Lab A-12, where Caultron had taken those boys. He expected them to shout at him, to arrest him, but they just waved him off. No place else to go but back to his own lab.

Klimenko closed and locked the door behind him, and then slumped in his chair, longing for some of his jazz favorites to comfort him. He should have brought some Brubeck or Davis or Monk here. There was only the sound of fans and computers and the clicking of the latest control machinery for cryo tubes that his team was developing. Loading the body with anti-freeze, then flash freezing and very gentle revival to avoid the ruptured cells from ice crystal expansion and melting, finally the replacement of the anti-freeze with synthetic plasma, that was the great hope of cryo-sleep believers.

Klimenko had thought that he was at the forefront, what they called the “cutting edge,” of the technology. But now it looked as if his work was just a cover for whatever Engelbrecht and Caultron had been up to.

He pushed that thought away and tried to sleep, but kept being awakened by nightmares that he himself had killed someone. Not Engelbrecht, but that man Caultron. One or both of the boys. Even Tanya and the children. It got to the point that he could no longer tell where the nightmares left off and reality began, who was dead or who was alive.

Inside Laboratory A-12, 12:30 am

"I think you really should tell your friend about your sister's true nature," Jim said. "None of this is going to make any sense to him otherwise."

"It doesn't fucking make any sense to me either!" Allan shot back at him.

"You tell him. Or I will."

Allan saw the expectant look on Keith's face. He took a deep breath. "Keith, you know those comic books about Supergirl? Not the new ones, but those old ones, about a Kryptonian girl."

"Yeah. So?"

"Well, Karalyn doesn't just look like her."

Keith stared. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"She has the same... abilities. More or less."

"As a Kryptonian? Are you fucking crazy?"

"No. She's a Velorian. Genetically engineered to be a woman of steel."

"Uh, huh. An alien?" Keith asked doubtfully, his eyes crinkling. It was some kind of joke, it had to be. He'd been very close to Karalyn. He'd surely know if she were made of steel. Then he thought of her unbelievable fitness, without working out.

"I know sounds crazy," Allan said a shake of his head. "But it's the God's honest truth."

"And it's the only reason she's still alive now," Jim interposed. "It's the only reason we can still save her."

Caultron got up from his chair, walked past them, and turned on the light over the cryo tube. It flickered and then lit up so show the bright image of Karalyn, floating nude and unconscious.

"The liquid is helium. Do you know how cold that is?" he asked Keith.

Allan gasped. "Jesus! The closest to absolute zero of any..." His voice drifted off.

Keith's only emotion was a wild fury that exploded inside him as he saw Karalyn's nude body on display. "Bastard!" he shouted. "You fucking bastard!"

Allan just stared anxiously at his sister. He and Karalyn had discovered a lot about what it meant to be Velorian, and he'd seen her do some pretty astounding things. But absolute zero? Then he saw what was labeled as an "EEG monitor" on the wall. There were strong waveforms marching across the screen. He knew enough to understand that that dead people have a flat EEG.

"He killed her," Keith sobbed. "This piece of shit *killed* her."

"She's *alive*, Keith," Allan said. "Don't you understand? She still has a chance."

Jim was about to say something, but there was a knock at the door. He crossed the lab to answer it. It was Major Willis.

"We've seen what's in the other lab," he said. "Engelbrecht refuses to talk about it, but I understand that Dr. Klimenko is in the same line of work – only with animals. I think he should have a look. There'll be a need for expert testimony if there's an official inquiry, if there's a trial."

"I don't think there'll be anything of the sort. But Dr. Klimenko may be of assistance to me on another matter. Could you bring him here, please?"

* * *

"This is perverse," Keith said after the MPs left.

"Perverse?" Caultron mused as he pulled his eyes from the lighted tube. "I was working for a higher good than you know, Keith. And there is nothing more perverse than putting billions of lives in jeopardy. If we didn't have a way to stop aliens like Karalyn, we might all die."

That's when the full magnitude of the horror crashed in on Keith. "Sweet Mother of Jesus, you're all insane. You thought you could save billions of lives by drowning my girlfriend? By putting her... on display? This just can't be fucking happening."

"It's happening for real. Dead real. I had to find a way to stop her murderous cousins."

"By murdering her? You're no better than Engelbrecht."

"I'm not Engelbrecht," Caultron bristled. "If it was up to him, you'd be dead. But I'm standing here at half past Midnight talking to you. Explaining why it was all so necessary."

"Necessary? To kill Karalyn? You think you're going to explain that, make me feel happy about it all? You don't understand shit."

"No, you're the one who doesn't understand. The Pentagon thinks she's going to defend us from the Arions. So they won't let us build weapons we'd really need. They've seen... what she can do."

"Those tests?"

Caultron nodded.

"And yours?"

"I had to prove that we weren't helpless, after all – that we could stand up on our own. That we could still defeat them all, if we had to. It'll take billions, but it can save us all."

The words spilled out in a heated rush, as if he were confessing to some sin. "You've got tons of nukes," Keith tossed in, totally confused now. "They'll stop anything."

"They didn't stop Karalyn. We tried. We tried everything. Until I came up with the key."

"Nukes?" Keith said as he rolled his eyes at Allan. "O.K, now I know it's time for the nice men in the white coats." He started to walk toward Caultron.

Allan reached out to grip his arm. "No, Keith. He's right. He's telling the truth."

"He's right about nukes not hurting these Arions or whatever? Or your sister? Keith, those god-damned things are as hot as the sun!"

"And you still think she gets that tan of hers on the beach?" Allan added.

"Duh. A tanning salon."

"Try the sun, Keith. Up close and personal."

Keith looked from Allan to Caultron and back again. "Now you're both fucking insane."

Allan ignored him, and appealed to Caultron.

"Tell me exactly how Karalyn's death makes any difference in all that? My sister will be a lot more useful to Earth if she's alive, trust me on this."

"My point exactly – now. The proof of what I accomplished is on record. And we *can* revive her, If we act quickly enough. But you must never say anything about this to anyone outside the project."

Keith glared at him.

But after a moment, he nodded with Allan in silent agreement.

Klimenko's Office

Klimenko had been dreaming that Engelbrecht had frozen the two boys and had given them over to him to try to save their lives. If he could just figure out how to reverse the cellular damage from freezing...

He awoke in sweat, screaming that it was impossible to revive them if they hadn't been properly prepared before freezing. But the familiar surroundings of his lab office reassured him. It had been just a dream. It was a relief – as well as he had prepared them, his animal subjects had suffered serious damage and lived for only days. No one would or should attempt such a thing on humans...

He glanced at the clock. Nearly 1:00 a.m. He was hungry. There were vending machines in A-block. Maybe the guards would let him into there to get some food. He ran his hands through his thinning hair to straighten it, and walked out the door – practically colliding with an MP, the same Major Willis he had encountered in the interrogation room.

"Dr. Klimenko, you are needed in Lab A-12," the MP said.

Now what?

"Is this about Engelbrecht?"

"Engelbrecht is being dealt with. You should not concern yourself with him."

Nothing he could do about that. Only follow this man. What did it matter any more?

Whatever they were up to in Lab A-12, they must want him in on it. He was an expert. But just what kind of expertise did they want?

When he entered the lab, he saw Caultron and the two boys. Caultron had donned some sort of insulated environment suit with thick gloves. He looked like a spaceman. But what really caught Klimenko's eye was the lighted cryo-tube. A beautiful young woman was floating lifelessly in it.

"Look carefully at the EEG monitor," Caultron said. "I think you'll understand the situation we're facing here."

He looked up at the readout, and his jaw dropped.

He quickly looked back at Caultron, his heart racing now. The girl in the liquid helium was still alive – her brain activity looked like someone in REM sleep,

dreaming. He opened his mouth to ask a question, and then closed it without speaking. People were dying around this place, and nobody human could live for two seconds in liquid helium. Their brains would be frozen solid, all activity ceasing, in ten seconds or less.

Caultron sensed what he'd been about to ask.

"She's superhuman. That's the short answer. But I don't have time for the long answer. Time is running out, even for her."

Klimenko's head was spinning. He couldn't take it all in. But there was one thing he did know.

"Then what are you waiting for? We've got to get her out of there!"

"For your help. It's going to be a dangerous procedure. You and the boys will need to step outside for the moment. But you'll have to be ready afterwards with the defibrillator."

Caultron picked up the case from next to his desk and offered it to Klimenko.

Klimenko looked at it doubtfully. "Will this be enough?"

"I don't know. You'll have to get her out of here on the trolley. Take it now. You may have noticed that there's another suit sitting on my chair. Take that, too. You'll also need the blanket next to it to cover her up. We can't afford to give the MPs too much to think about. I've given them plenty already."

"But... but how are you going to get her out of the tube?"

"With this," Caultron said, revealing the Glock. "It's the fastest way, if not the safest."

"He's explained it to us," Allan interjected. "It's going to get cold as hell in here."

"Which is why the boys will be joining you outside. You'll warn the MPs about a dangerous experiment, and ask them to stand well clear. You'll all stand well clear yourselves."

"But... a gun?" ventured Klimenko.

"It won't hurt her," Allan assured him.

The young woman was bulletproof? Klimenko thought. *Well, her brother would know about that. But still.*

"You can't revive her until she's out of there, doctor," Jim said. "But... then... it will all come down to you. Maybe I'll survive, maybe not. It's a big lab. I haven't got time to run all the figures through my head. But at the best, I'll going to be incapacitated."

"Engelbrecht should be the one. He did this."

"He wouldn't. And he didn't. *I* did this."

Klimenko was speechless. He looked at the boys.

"He told us already," said Allan.

"It's time for all of you to get out," Caultron said. "*Far* out."

Klimenko and the boys left as instructed, carrying the spare environmental suit and the defibrillator. They told Willis and the other MPs what they had been told to tell them, but embellished it.

"Engelbrecht fucked with the system in there," Keith said. "It could blow at any time. That's what Caultron said."

Willis looked for confirmation to Klimenko, who simply nodded.

There came a staccato burst of automatic fire from inside the lab, an explosion and then a mighty wind blowing coldly through the open lock. Traces of a helium vapor fog drifted towards the ceiling of the hallway. It had to be well below zero even out here. Klimenko, shaking like a leaf from the cold, didn't want to think about what it must be like inside.

"I don't think I'm up to this," he said softly, turning to Keith. "You should be the one to go after him – when it's safe to do so."

But Keith turned to Allan. "Karalyn's your kin," he said. "You have the most at stake here."

After a brief exchange between them, they agreed that Allan was also the fittest, in mind and body, to bring out Caultron, and then save Karalyn – if indeed she could still be saved.

When Klimenko judged it safe, Allan entered the lab, and found Caultron unconscious, dragging him out and turning him over to the MPs to take to the medical station.

Laboratory A-12

It was an hour later; the lab was back to normal – close to normal, anyway, but still chilly. They were alone in the hallway; the MPs hadn't returned. And there was nothing to give them away in the lab itself – the monitors had been disabled in the... accident, they'd call it.

Karalyn's life was now in Allan's hands; he was suited up, Keith joining him with an extra set of cryogenic mitts "borrowed" from Caultron – he hadn't thought it wise to borrow the suit as well. The MPs might have thought Klimenko would actually be wearing the second suit and taking charge of whatever needed to be done.

Karalyn's eyes were wide open, her pupils fixed and dilated as Allan, still suited and with heavy mitts, dragged her off the titanium shelf and let her drop to the floor. The polished metal reflected her like a mirror. She still had the incredibly healthy look that was her trademark, her vibrant pink skin and wide-open eyes making her seem awake and alert. Certainly healthy and alive.

Only, she was neither. Her skin temperature was barely fifty degrees above absolute zero. She hadn't had a heartbeat in two hours, although an EEG would still have found a great deal of brain activity. She was dying.

A thin film of frozen condensing moisture from the air had begun to coat her.

Allan grabbed her shoulders with his mitts and shook her desperately. "Karalyn, wake up baby. Karalyn!"

She might as well have been made of stone her body was so rigid.

"She doesn't have enough energy," he shouted over his shoulder as he checked out the defibrillator. "We've got to introduce both a shock and a whole lot of energy into her system."

He picked up the paddles and looked at them doubtfully, then at Keith – who shook his head.

"Shit, Allan, I read those things are dangerous. You have to know what you're doing."

"Karalyn's an *alien*. Like Supergirl, more or less. Remember? I mean, how else would you revive her?"

Keith just stared down at his girlfriend. She looked so alive. "If she's what you say she is, then it's probably going to take a fucking nuke."

"Well, we don't have one," Allan quipped, ignoring Keith's desperate attempt at levity as he dragged the defibrillator closer. "This is our best shot. Help me roll her over on her back."

Keith grabbed her shoulders again and twisted. Karalyn's body was frozen to the floor. He pulled with all his strength, finally managing to break her free and turn her over. The numbing cold threatened to freeze his hands despite the mitts. "What the hell is she made of, anyway?"

"You know her better than I do, Keith," Allan snapped as he knelt beside her with the paddles. "You know what I mean."

Keith ignored that bit of innuendo and started pushing buttons on the defibrillator. "What setting?"

"Got me. Just max it out."

Keith's fingers shook as he punched the three buttons to set it at 999. He pushed the Charge button. The machine began to whine. "It's maxed."

Allan debated where to put the paddles, and finally decided to place them directly on his sister's breasts. Not only would she store any energy there, but the shock would reach her heart as well. He blushed as he touched the paddles to her bare skin and then leaned his whole weight onto them. The paddles rocked back and forth on her hard, pointed nipples. Her body was as unyielding as an ice sculpture.

The high-pitched tone from the device took his mind off his embarrassment. He just hoped to hell his sister wasn't going to remember any of this. She'd tease him unmercifully.

"I think that means go, man," Keith shouted excitedly.

"Clear." Allan shouted like he'd seen on TV. He wasn't touching her body anywhere except with the paddles. He stabbed the two buttons on the top of the paddle handles.

A loud crack filled the air, and a riot of sparks shot across Karalyn's chest. That was followed by a sizzle as two tiny plumes of steam came from under the

paddles. Yet her body didn't jerk like on doctor shows on TV. "Again, damn it. Again. Give me more charge."

"That's all it has," Keith said as he hit the Charge button again.

Allan fired the paddles when the tone came on again. Still no response. Not so much as a twitch.

"Shit. We need something seriously heavy duty," Allan shouted, almost panicking now as he looked around wildly. He glanced down to see a tint of blue darkening Karalyn's lips. A very bad sign.

"Heavy duty? Like what?" Keith asked, looking bewildered now. He was still struggling to come to grips with his girlfriend being more or less like the Supergirl he'd always loved in the comics.

He couldn't even begin to grasp that, and here they were, zapping her and trying to bring her back from the dead as she lay naked on the floor, her eyes wide-open like she was awake. Her body was surrounded in mist as a layer of ice had formed over her. All except her breasts, which looked pink and normal.

"I don't know, man," Allan said. "Serious fucking power!"

That jogged Keith's memory. "*The fence!*" he shouted.

"But how are we going to get her there?"

"We've got to get her on the trolley."

"We're going to need Caultron."

"Assuming he's recovered. Otherwise Klimenko."

"They'd never let *him*."

"But he could come up with another story."

"We'll have to feed him one. But first we have to get Karalyn on the trolley, and cover her up."

It took both of them – Keith assisting Allan as best he could with just his mitts – while they argued about how to get her out to the fence. It was Keith who spread the blanket over Karalyn's body, as Allan left the lab to find Klimenko.

"We failed with the... specimen." That was how he put it, just in case the walls outside had ears. "But we need to dispose of the remains. Don't want to stink up the place."

Klimenko wasn't sure just what was going on – if they really had given up on Karalyn, Allan would hardly be so casual about it. He was about to ask about that when an MP turned up, carrying a portable phone.

"Sergeant Frank Preston," he introduced himself. "Do either of you know a Seth Vickers?"

"A maintenance tech for... certain equipment in the lab," Klimenko said, catching himself before mentioning just what sort of equipment.

"Well, a woman who says she's his girlfriend just arrived at the gate, driving his truck. She says he's under the weather, but that she's to start work as an administrative assistant today, so he let her borrow the truck."

"I know nothing about her," Klimenko said. "Or even the truck."

"Well, the make and model check out. So does the license plate."

"I assume Security must have her particulars, and her picture."

"They say she's a real looker."

"Hard to believe."

"That she's a looker?"

"That Vickers would appeal to her."

Allan was getting impatient with this distraction

"Has the garbage been picked up yet," he broke in.

"I think the truck's out there." Preston said. "What of it?"

"We need a pickup," Allan explained. "You've got garbage dump out near the entrance. We've got dead animals killed in that explosion at the lab. Maybe you heard about it."

Klimenko was beginning to get the picture. What Allan wanted to take out was *not* garbage, and neither dead nor an animal. But he dared not let on to Security that he knew about Karalyn... He'd best keep his silence.

"Yeah, I heard," Preston said, in an annoyed tone. "But it doesn't sound like standard procedure to dispose of animals that way. Just food waste. Anyway, it can wait. We have to see about this Summerfield woman first. Let me check."

He called Security on his phone, and talked to the chief.

"She's legit," he said afterwards.

"Who do we talk to about the garbage?" Allan persisted.

"Solid Waste Management."

"Well, can you get hold of them?"

"I've got other things to attend to."

"Maybe I can help," Klimenko ventured, sensing an opportunity. He got on his own portable phone and managed to track down somebody at Solid Waste Management to explain the situation. Whoever answered was curt, but told him what he wanted to hear.

"They don't give a shit," he said after breaking the connection. "Everything organic goes into the truck and gets ground up, and the truck empties the ground up garbage into the pit. But it's leaving in ten minutes. Better hurry."

Keith and Allan hurried. Nobody paid them much attention as they wheeled the trolley out to the waiting truck. They surprised the guy in charge of loading by tipping the sheet full of supposed animals into the maw themselves.

"Thank you kindly," the man said.

"We need the exercise," Allan said.

"You should shuck that suit, and try working out in the gym."

"Just came from the lab, Have to wear it there. Danger of infection."

"I don't want to know anything about that. Not cleared for it."

"Yeah, well we've got to get back."

He and Keith headed back inside.

"We've got to see Caultron, and hope he's up to the next step."

"Next?"

"Karalyn won't get ground up, of course. But somebody's got to get her from the dump to the fence, and we can't attend to that unless he takes us out there. I just hope they don't notice the damage to the truck when they make the dump."

"I don't care what I agreed to before," Keith said. "If she dies, *he* dies."

"Don't talk crazy. You'd never get the chance, anyway. Just pray that he's regained consciousness."

To Be Concluded