

Homecoming Part III

By Velvet and Brantley

With photo manips by Shadar

1. Bleak Landing

It was only as the shuttle was coming in for a landing that Ju'lette thought how bleak Velor appeared.

She had been born here. It was the only world she had known for the first sixteen years of her life. And yet it seemed strange to her now, alien. Was this truly her home? Could it ever be again?

It didn't help that Tassos had been denied entry, forced to stay behind on Erin'lah when she boarded the in-systemer for her homeworld. Mbali Ndlovu had likewise been left behind with Kobe, albeit only because they could not safely set foot on Velor. As for Pimponeous, he might have managed the trip, but he was still refusing to cooperate.

Zanele Oweaba would have to represent her people before the High Council, although she was a warrior rather than chosen leader of a clan. Mbali had coached her well, however, and she might make a better impression than Ju'lette herself. Ju'lette had been told she was still subject to the authority of the High

Council for Off-World Affairs, and the reaction from the bureaucrats there by over the com was far from promising,

The officials had at first been confused about her and Tassos. What she had done was unheard of, they had said, and therefore impossible. When they had seen proof, they turned arrogant. What she had done was illegal, they complained; Tassos himself was illegal. When she asked precisely what law she had broken, they had become angry as well as arrogant, unable to cite chapter-and-verse on the matter.

"If there has been some oversight by the Senate in this matter, it shall be speedily corrected," some deputy-deputy administrator had told her frostily. It seemed that he thought that the Senate should defer to the High Council in all matters concerning Velorians working offworld — meaning, in nearly all cases, the Companions.

Ju'lette was no longer a Companion. Not exactly. Don Alfonso's treachery on Nova Iberia had freed her of that. But freed her for what? Precedent appeared to be unclear on the matter; at least it had never been addressed in her training — not that she could remember. Could they send her out again, sell her contract to some new master, Skietra knew where?

She would never suffer that, She would simply leave with the Scalantrans and jump ship with Tassos at the first chance, But the thought that the Council might try troubled her as she gazed out the port at the rough landscape of Velor.



Already, the world's dusty atmosphere was dimming the sun. From the surface, it would appear red. Many Velorians had once believed that to be its true color, although its apparent hue was no more natural than that of the sky.

But everything about Velor is unnatural, she reflected. Ourselves included.

The deputy-deputy administrator had reacted with casual disdain to the news — the Aurean attack on Tanzrobi and its aftermath, which had cost her and the others so much time and trouble to bring. When she persisted, she had been met only with stubborn condescension; the petty bureaucrat had treated her like a child, interrupting her with pointless chatter, and then browbeating her.

“What evidence can you offer of these alleged new Aurean weapons?” he had challenged her. “How dare you infer that we Velorians ourselves are in danger?”

We are not Tanzrobians. Spreading unfounded rumors can only undermine the morale of candidates, undermine the Academy, undermine the High Council itself. This we cannot permit. Consider yourself warned.”

Perhaps she could reach someone in the Senate. Or perhaps her parents could help. Unlike the deputy-deputy, they had welcomed the news of her arrival. If there had been fatted calves on Velor, they would have slain one in her honor.

Only, she hadn't told them about Tassos. Neither, it was evident, had the Academy, after she had reported in at Erin'lah. But the Academy said as little as possible about the Companions. It might create discontent for ordinary Velorians to know what it was like to live outside the gold field, to fly, to —

She remembered flying with Tassos, making love in the middle of the air. And now he was restricted to the port on Erin'lah with the *Far Wanderer*. It was almost more than she could bear. Yet bear it she must, if there were be to any hope of making Velorians *listen*, making them see the Aurean menace that was creeping across the Galaxy like a dark nebula.

Time. It had taken so much time to reach here. Surely the Aureans had used that time, and used it well. If even the Tanzrobians had been helpless before them, what hope had other worlds and peoples in the Empire's path?

She glanced at Zanele, seated next to her. The Scalantrans had managed to obtain clearance for her to land, vouching that she was an ambassador. Velor had never had any relations with Tanzrobi, but the High Council had at least heard of the planet, and the existence of *supremis* other than Velorians and Aureans seemed to pique its interest.

That was what the Scalantrans had told Zanele, and Zanele had told her at any rate. They had exhausted the subject on the long flight from Erin'lah; there was nothing more to say now. It would be ironic if the Azizi could gain a hearing when she herself could not. Yet it was important that they both have a chance to testify; Zanele herself could see that.

It had seemed so simple when she had left Andros. She had thought they would be heading straight for Velor — as straight as possible, at any rate, once the adolescent Cohort had been dropped off, given the fact that wormholes weren't conveniently lined up to speed travel between whatever points sentients might arbitrarily designate as A and B.

Oh yes, it had been so simple then. The life she'd had. The dreams she'd had....

2. Ship's Life

They had found it easy to settle into ship's life once more after they left Andros; after all, Tassos had made this journey once before.

Luckily, their quarters were large enough to accommodate them comfortably — more than comfortably, as they had been created for consignments of several Companions. That anyone would want a single room was a concept quite alien to the Scalantrans.

Tassos had learned enough of the Scalantran language to allow him to conduct trade negotiations. Now Ju'lette, with the help of Aleeza, worked with him to improve his fluency. Although the Scalantrans had deepteach programs

for Velorian and a number of Terran languages, they had never thought to develop one for their own tongue.

Ju'lette and Tassos cleared part of their room so she could give him martial arts lessons. There was no point in having superhuman strength if he didn't know how to use it properly. At night, they practiced the marital arts; their super hearing picked up the sounds of the Scalantrans doing the same.

The Scalantrans were anxious to continue their own martial arts lessons and Ju'lette was happy to oblige. She enjoyed teaching them and watching their progress. And now, Tassos joined the group as a sparring partner for the students.

It was a good thing he'd been enhanced, because the pressure the Scalantrans had learned to exert on a neck with their double thumbs would have been fatal to an ordinary human. Among themselves, of course, they had to hold back; but with Tassos, they could pretend to go for the kill – short of injuring themselves, of course.

At the outset, she had wondered why the Scalantrans would be interested in such an activity – they were traders, not fighters. Or if they did fight, it was by stealth, as in the First Strike or, for that matter, the recapture of the *Far Wanderer* itself.

Yet because the Scalantrans were fabulously rich, there were those who believed that their wealth could not possibly come from honest trade. There had been stories among Don Alfonso's men on Nova Iberia, she recalled, about a people called the Jews. There had never been any Jews there, but for some

reason the Scalantrans were compared to them – liars and cheats. She had never understood this.

True, the Scalantrans were hard bargainers, but they never cheated. Not by their own lights. If a man on some primitive world insisted on buying high-tech equipment he couldn't possibly maintain or repair, that was his lookout. Only if he didn't agree, he might await the next visit of the ship, bring along his friends, and try to take it out on the first Scalantran he could find – they all looked alike as far as men of his ilk were concerned.

“There have been incidents in which some of us were forced to use weapons in our defense,” Trade Captain Dowjem told her. “This caused negative reactions among local authorities, and in one case even led to attempted arrests that forced us to cut short our trade fair. But if we can keep any such altercations within the limits of what humans call a ‘fair fight,’ we can hopefully avoid a recurrence of such problems.”

Ju'lette also continued the lessons she had begun on the cultures she had studied at the Academy and that she had endured as a Companion. Now Tassos joined her, teaching them about the culture of Andros.

Tassos had brought pictures of mosaics with him including some that had been made on commissions from the governments of other planets. He not only showed these as part of human art appreciation, he held long discussions with the traders about the expansion of mosaic exporting.

Ju'lette was happy to renew her friendship with Aleeza. She often spent time talking to Aleeza when Tassos was occupied. By now, she had learned to

interpret Scalantran body language. About half-way through the trip, she began to notice that Aleeza seemed both excited and nervous. When she asked her about it, Aleeza replied: “The new cohort will soon be conceived.”

“And you want to be one of the mothers?” Ju’lette said.

“That’s right,” Aleeza replied, her face taking on the expression Ju’lette had learned was the equivalent of a human smile.

“And who will be the lucky father?”

“Densan, I hope,” Aleeza replied, with what would have been a blush if she had been human.

“What do you mean, you hope?”

“The medical staff has to give their approval.”

“You mean they have the power to decide who becomes parents?”

“No, no. It’s a medical decision. I mean, it depends on genetics. You see, even though we don’t know who our parents are, there are extensive genetic records of our ancestry. And they make sure that there’s no chance of any genetic disease.”

“Are you really worried?”

“Well, rejection doesn’t happen too often — but there’s always a chance.”

A few days later, Aleeza came into Ju’lette and Tassos’ room looking very happy. She was glad that Ju’lette was alone.

“We’ve been approved!”

“That’s wonderful Aleeza. Were any couples rejected?”

“Just one. But they were told that there was another couple they could switch with and they’d all have very good prospects. The two couples agreed readily. I know that many would find my attitude unnatural, but I would be really unhappy if my first child couldn’t be Densan’s.”

“So how does it work?” Ju’lette asked. “I know you’re not fertile now.”

“In 25 shifts, all the females who are going to get pregnant will be given a drug to be taken for 30 shifts. Then in another 30 shifts, our fertility will be restored. And then there will be a ceremony for all the couples.”

“Will you just stay with Densan until you become pregnant?”

“No. We’ll stay together at least until the baby is born. Being pregnant gives us a special bond and we wouldn’t want to be with anyone else during that time.”

Once again, Ju’lette began to think about bearing a child by Tassos. It was an exciting prospect, but she knew it would have to wait until she had taken care of her business on Velor. Tassos’ status was unique, except for Alexius, and who knew where he was or what kind of a life he was leading?

Tassos and Ju’lette didn’t know what their future held, except that they would be together. It was one thing to accept such an unknown future for themselves, but quite another to impose it upon their children. But they knew that they had a long life ahead of them, so they could put off making a decision about children for a long time.

3. In Cohorts

When Aleeza walked into their room, Ju’lette could tell that she was happy.

"It's been confirmed," Aleeza said. "I'm pregnant."

"That's wonderful," Ju'lette said.

"Congratulations," Tassos added.

Aleeza came in and sat down on the Scalantran chair they kept there for her visits. "All the physical signs were there. I went to the medical officer today for my first pre-natal visit. She did tests and said I'm 50 shifts pregnant."

"Are you feeling okay?" Ju'lette asked.

"Of course, why shouldn't I?"

"Well, when I was on Nova Iberia I learned that many women feel nausea at the beginning of their pregnancies. I guess Scalantrans don't have that problem."

"No. I feel better now than ever before. Everything's better, even sex."

"That's great. When will the baby be born?"

"Should be in about 800 shifts. Or 170 days, as you'd say."

"That's much shorter than the human gestation period," Tassos said.

"Well then, of course, there's the time the baby spends in my *tlax*," Aleeza said. "All the new parents and babies will be in seclusion then, so I won't be able to see you for a while. It's really a lovely time, even though we can't have sex."

"My brother complained about not being allowed to have sex with his wife after the babies were born," Tassos said. "But he understood that it would be bad for her health."

"No, it's not about my health. It's because the baby is in my *tlax*," Aleeza explained.

Tassos and Ju'lette looked at each other and then at Aleeza. Finally, Ju'lette said: "We don't understand what a *tlax* is."

"I don't know how to explain it to you." Aleeza thought for a minute. "You're pretty good at reading Scalantran now, Ju'lette. I'll bring you a book that we use to teach our children about sex and birth."

Aleeza left and came back a little while later. "Here's the book. I think it will explain everything to you. It has lots of pictures."

Ju'lette and Tassos opened the book as soon as Aleeza left. The first illustrations showed a naked adult male and female. The first thing that Tassos noticed was that the female had no breasts. Then they saw that the male lacked a scrotum. "I wonder where his testes are," Ju'lette said.

The next pages showed the internal organs. "They're inside his body," Tassos said.

Then there were illustrations of couples having sex. "Well, that's seems to be basically the same as humans," Ju'lette said.

"We know that they enjoy it as much as we do," Tassos said.

After explaining the mechanism of fertilization, the book showed the changes in the female's body. What had seemed to be just a flap of skin began to enlarge and separate from the female's abdomen as the fetus grew. The space between that skin and the abdomen was labeled *tlax*. And on the abdomen, inside the *tlax*, something resembling teats began to develop.

"No wonder she couldn't translate *tlax*," Ju'lette said. "There's nothing like it on mammals."

Then the book explained how the baby was born about 800 shifts after conception. It didn't look too much like an adult Scalantran. It showed the baby emerging from the mother. Then it showed the father helping the baby work its way up the mother's abdomen and then into her *tlax*, where it latched onto one of the teats.

The baby would stay there for about 300 shifts, obtaining nourishment through the teat. After that it would gradually spend more time outside the *tlax* until it didn't need the *tlax* anymore.

Ju'lette and Tassos looked at each other in amazement. "Well," Tassos said. "Why should we expect them to be like humans?"

The book went on to explain that a ship was not at all like the natural environment where Scalantrans evolved. It was noisy and had very bright lights. So a special room was set aside for the newborns and their parents, with sound insulation and low lights.

"I'm surprised you didn't know about this all along," Tassos said after they'd gone over the book. "After all, you've been traveling with the Scalantrans for years now."

Ju'lette would have blushed if Velorians were capable of that.

"It just never came up. I never knew anything about how the Scalantrans reproduce except that they did it all at the same time."

"And they never volunteered anything about it?"

"They usually don't. They usually wait for me to ask. They don't like to share anything about themselves with outsiders — not unless they really trust them,

And then, as I said, they wait to be asked. And yet, they've never held anything back when I *have* asked."

"Maybe that's how they're wired up inside."

"Maybe. Anyway, it's funny what we take for granted."

"I'll say."

A thought crossed Tassos' mind. Ju'lette could see it on his face.

"What about us?" he asked. "What about our children? I know that Velorian women can control their own ovulation, but—"

"Not yet," she cautioned him. "There's too much at stake."

"Meaning, the High Council."

"And the Senate. I don't think they'd listen to us if they knew we were even considering it. 'Naturalists,' they'd call us, the next worst thing to Aureans. What they'd call you, I simply can't imagine. There's no precedent for it — none that they know of, anyway."

"What about your family?"

"As I've said before, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it. But I love you, Tassos. Remember that. I will never let anything come between us, including ties of blood — well, ties of blood as tweaked by the Maternity Engine."

Tassos laughed at that, but not very loudly. It was a touchy subject, and he knew that there could be a touchier one yet, one they had thus far avoided. Where would they *go*, after they had — hopefully — accomplished their mission? Where *could* they go? And if they had children, where could they find suitable

partners when they came of age? Would they become lonely exiles like that poor princeling of Kalla's?

They'd have to face those questions one day, he knew. But for tonight, it was enough to find solace in each other's bodies.

The next time Aleeza visited them, she had more news. "I've had my scan and it's a girl."

"That's great Aleeza," Ju'lette said. "Have you started thinking about a name?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Because of all you've done for us, I'd like to name her Juletta."

"I'd be honored. But Liz'bet is even more deserving."

"Oh, I'm sure someone will name their baby Lizbetta. But I feel that we've become friends. I think we're as close as two people from such different species can be."

"Yes — I feel that way too."

"And there's something else. We're all particularly grateful that you're on the ship now."

"Why is that?" Ju'lette asked.

"Isn't it obvious? I told you that we have to be in isolation when our babies are in our *tlaxim*. And the babies' fathers are there also. Can't you see how vulnerable we are then?"

"Of course, I should have realized it. You'll be terribly short-handed."

“In an emergency, the men can return to their posts. But the women cannot leave for any reason.”

“I suppose that’s why you’ve been so secretive about how you reproduce,” Tassos said.

“Yes, no one can know about our vulnerability. Some of our leaders didn’t want me to tell you, but I told them that you’d become concerned if you didn’t see me for such a long time.”

“You can trust us, Aleeza,” Ju’lette said. “I’m planning on writing about your people but I’ll keep that part secret.”

Aleeza’s face took on the Scalantran equivalent of a big smile. “I knew I could trust you.”

Aleeza entered their room escorting another female. She was short for a Scalantran, though still much taller than Ju’lette. Her hair was lighter than Aleeza’s and seemed to lack luster, giving them the impression that she was considerably older.

“Ju’lette, Tassos, this is Shushna. She’ll be your liaison when I’m in isolation. I wanted you to get acquainted before then.”

After greeting each other, Ju’lette asked Shushna what her job was on the ship.

“I’m a teacher. And I’m very much interested in other cultures, so I’m really pleased to be chosen to be your temporary liaison.”

It didn't take many visits before Ju'lette and Tassos and Shushna felt very comfortable together. One day, Shushna came in all excited. "I've seen the new schedule. The older cohort will be taken to Wild River Youthworld. It's the planet where I spent my own youth. It'll be wonderful seeing it again. They were such happy years."

"I'm so happy for you, Shushna," Ju'lette said. "But what will we do while the *Far Wanderer* is there? We'd love to go down to the planet."

"I'll do my best to get you permission," Shushna answered. "And I could show you around. There are some beautiful places to visit. We try to keep the Youthworlds as natural as possible. Just enough industry and agriculture to support the students and staff."

"Are there a lot of Youthworlds?" Ju'lette asked.

"Oh, I don't know exactly how many. Just enough for our needs. Scattered around so no one has to go too far out of their way to get to one when it's time."

Ju'lette realized that Shushna was talking in the way Scalantrans did when they didn't want to give away details of their way of life. She also figured that it was safer to have many worlds for the youths and keeping them natural was a good way to hide them from enemies.

"Thanks, Shushna," Tassos said. "We really appreciate your help."

"And there's one more piece of news. Jonjerem is going to retire there. He wants to teach at the school for advanced students and write his memoirs."

Ju'lette hadn't seen much of Jonjerem lately. He'd been spending nearly all his time sharing a life's worth of knowledge and experience with Densan. But she

thought he had chosen Wild River wisely. With the Cohort there, he wouldn't be completely cut off from the people he'd known on the *Far Wanderer*.

"I'm sure he'll be happy," she said, reckoning that Shushna had thought of that already, that it might have played a part in the ship's decision.

"The Cohort is very happy about it," Shushna said. "They understand that if it wasn't for his inspiring talks they wouldn't have realized how important their drills were and may not have been able to keep silent and keep the younger cohort silent during the Aurean attack. They realize that they owe their lives to him. They've asked him to visit their school and talk to the students."

"That must have made him feel good," Ju'lette said.

"I was there when they asked him. I could tell how happy he was."

4. Cabin Fever

In space, nobody can hear you moan. In fact, you can't moan at all.

Ju'lette and Tassos had already known that when they prevailed on Travel Captain Marpolom to let them make love outside the ship. They thought it would be an extra kick, and since Ju'lette had experience flying in space, she'd have no trouble getting back to the airlock.

It didn't stay a kick for long.

Sure, it was a rush to expose their naked bodies to the vacuum, to gaze at each other against the backdrop of a million stars. But as for actually doing it — well, there was the leverage problem for starters. They figured out a few ways to deal with that, but it was the silence that finally made the experience pall.

“Gravity. There’s nothing like it,” remarked Tassos after they gave up on the idea.

“Air, there’s nothing like it,” Ju’lette agreed.

Maybe there’d be a sea bottom or a volcano or a glacier or a hurricane where they were going. But the change of cohorts was still months away. Meanwhile...

Meanwhile, life onboard ship continued as best it could without the couples who were in seclusion. All the basic ship functions had to be seen to. The children had to be taken care of and taught. Ju’lette continued teaching martial arts and human cultures and Tassos continued teaching human art appreciation.

That involved also teaching something of the history of Andros, of how the art of mosaics had originated with the Greeks of the Byzantine Empire. That in turn led to such sidelights as the parallel between the careers of the Companion Kalla, whose image often appeared in mosaics, and Theodora, who had been co-empress with Justinian more than 900 years ago.

“She had a scandalous past,” he told the Scalantrans. “Before she caught the emperor’s eye, she had appeared in live sex shows. Or perhaps that was *where* she caught his eye.”

Tassos’ students stared at him blankly. They knew nothing of “live sex shows,” and couldn’t make sense of the concept even when he did his best to explain it. He didn’t have any luck trying to teach dance, either; it was so alien to the Scalantrans that they didn’t even have a word for it — they called it “moving around in patterns.”

They also couldn't understand how something that began as such a formal exercise — with a “koryphaios” leading modestly-dressed Androssians in a circle, clanging cymbals and waving kerchiefs over their heads — evolved into an exercise in sexual display and seduction.

“If they wanted to have sex, why didn't they just say so?” one of his students wondered. Tassos told Ju'lette about that later, when they were dancing naked in their quarters.

Leisure time had weighed heavily on them. They admitted to each other that their excursion outside the ship had been as much to alleviate the boredom as to have an exotic sexual experience. It had really started when Tassos said to Ju'lette: “I don't know how the Scalantrans do it.”

“Do what?”

“Live on a ship for such long periods of time.”

“That's the way they're brought up,” Ju'lette answered. “It's their way of life.”

“I guess you're right. But it's starting to drive me crazy.”

That's when Ju'lette had the brilliant idea of making love in hard vacuum. At least it had seemed like a brilliant idea at the time. In retrospect, Tassos thought it slightly foolish and wondered what the Scalantrans thought of them.

At the end of their day, when they knew that no Scalantran would come to their room, they would strip. They enjoyed being naked together, even in non-sexual situations.

They spent a lot of time simply talking to each other, filling each other in on childhood experiences, titillating each other with their sexual experiences.

Tassos was fascinated by Ju'lette's stories of youthful sexual experimentation, wild parties. It took him a while to accept the fact that Velorians, especially the women, had bisexual tendencies, but once he did, he got a huge kick out of Ju'lette's stories of threesomes and foursomes and moresomes.

And after the stories they would make love, sometimes wildly, sometimes slowly. Sometimes they played games. Tassos liked to pretend that they were strangers at a Velorian party. Once, Ju'lette wanted to pretend that she was an Androssian virgin bride on her wedding night, but she found it hard to act innocent and wound up laughing hysterically.

One day, Tassos said to Ju'lette: "I've been thinking about the vagaries of life."

"What do you mean?"

"If you hadn't been indentured to someone despicable, you'd have stayed on some planet and we'd never have gotten back together."

"That's true. I always wanted to be like Kalla. Do something important."

"Are you sorry about the way things turned out?"

Ju'lette was quiet for a few minutes. "No, Tassos. Even if I had a good master, like Liz'bet or Kalla, it wouldn't have been someone I'd chosen. I think it's probably rare for a Companion and her master to fall in love, like Liz'bet and Gabriel. Liz'bet was particularly lucky in that respect."

Ju'lette went over and kissed Tassos. "I love you and want to spend my life with you. But ..."

Tassos gathered her into his arms. "But what, Ju'lette?"

“I wonder what our lives will be like. I can only hope that the High Council will take me seriously. But it’s only a hope. And what about my family? Will they reject you the way your family rejected me? If so, where can we go?”

Tassos started to stroke her gently. “I don’t know Ju’lette. But we’ll find somewhere to go. We’ll find something to do. Somehow, we’ll make a life together.”

Tassos continued stroking Ju’lette’s body and his lips joined his hands. She moaned softly when his lips reached the hollow of her neck. Slowly, thoroughly, he covered her body with his kisses and caresses. She let her hands roam over his body. They spent a long time kissing and caressing each other, exploring the bodies that they knew so well, but would never have enough of.

Finally, Ju’lette could stand it no longer. She lay down on her back and drew Tassos inside her. She let out a deep moan of joy as he stroked her myriad pleasure points. Her legs went around him and she caressed him with her feet, sliding them along his legs and his ass.

Then she started to move slowly, letting him know that she wanted it to last as long as possible. On and on they went, moving together as one, lost in the primal rhythm their bodies had grown to know so well. And finally they came, screaming in ecstasy, incoherent shouts mingling with words of love.

They lay together for a long time. Right before falling asleep, Ju’lette murmured: “It’ll be all right. As long as we’re together.”

5. Tlaxmates

Ju'lette and Tassos found life very quiet now. The parents of the new cohort had been sequestered, and the tiny infant Scalantrans were being nurtured in their mothers' *tlaxim*.

Ju'lette continued her classes. She enjoyed teaching the older cohort. But she noticed a change in them, a lack of concentration in their studies. When Ju'lette mentioned this to Shushna, Shushna made the barking sound that Ju'lette had learned was Scalantran laughter.

"They're entering puberty," Shushna told her. "It may not be obvious to you, but their bodies are changing."

"Aleeza told me about your custom of sexual initiation. It seems like a really good idea."

"You mean you don't have an initiation?"

"No."

"How do you know what to do?"

Now it was Ju'lette's turn to laugh. "We just seem to figure it out, somehow."

"I'll never forget my initiation," Shushna said. "Even though it was so very long ago. He was so gentle and understanding. I'd hate to do it the first time with a young boy who didn't know what he was doing."

"Well, sometimes the first experience isn't that great. But we keep at it until we get it right."

It took a minute for Shushna to get the joke, then she started laughing and Ju'lette joined her.

“Do they ever have sex before their initiation?”

“No, we make sure of that. We keep a close eye on the senior cohort at this point and we don’t let them be alone together. There’s not many places to sneak off to in a ship.”

“Maybe in the martial arts classes I should separate the boys and girls.”

“Good idea,” Shushna responded. “Anyway, we make sure they keep really busy now. Soon we’ll be giving them more detailed sex education lessons and preparing them for initiation.”

One day, while Ju’lette was working on her diary, she heard the door open and a much welcome voice call her name. She turned around and said: “Aleeza! It’s so good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too, Ju’lette. It’s the first shift we’ve been allowed out of sequestration. I wanted to show you Juletta.”

“Where is she?” Ju’lette asked.

“Right here in my *tlax*, of course.”

“Can she come out?”

“I’ll try to coax her out. Remember, this is her first time in a strange environment. I can’t stay out here too long.”

Aleeza gently stroked the bulge that was Juletta. Finally, a brown fuzzy head pushed through a slit in Aleeza’s dress and peeked at Ju’lette.

Although Ju’lette was used to the Scalantrans’ large eyes, Juletta’s eyes seemed tremendous.

“She’s adorable,” Ju’lette said. “Can she come completely out of your *tlax*?”

“Yes. Sometimes she’ll come completely out and lie on my chest. But that’s as far as she’ll go.”

Juletta looked around, made some mewling sounds, and then withdrew all the way into the *tlax*.

“She’s starting to nurse now. I’d better get back.”

“Thanks again for showing her to me.”

It wasn’t long after Aleeza brought a tottering Juletta to show off to Ju’lette, that all discipline in the senior cohort seemed to break down. The only studies they seemed interested in were sex education and preparation for their initiations.

Ju’lette enjoyed watching Juletta become more and more steady on her feet. She’d been surprised to learn that Scalantran babies never crawled, but went straight to walking.

Aleeza told Ju’lette that the initiation ceremonies would take place 40 shifts after the infant cohort started sleeping away from their parents. Then Aleeza told her the good news: “Both Densan and I have been chosen to be initiators.”

“Congratulations. I guess it’s considered an honor.”

“Oh, yes. I think the girl that Densan will initiate is very lucky.”

“When do you find out who the lucky boy you’ll initiate is?”

“Oh, I already know. I have to talk to his teachers and the adults in his mate-group so I can learn about his personality and his interests. I have to know if he’s

shy or outgoing or even aggressive. If he's shy, I'll have to draw him out and teach him to take the initiative. If he's too aggressive, I'll have to teach him to hold back, not overwhelm a young girl. And I have to spend some time in class learning from older women who've already been initiators. It's a very important responsibility."

"Will you talk to his friends?"

"Oh no. The cohort doesn't know about the initiators preparations. And they don't find out who their initiator is until the ceremony. Anyway, the initiator is always from another mate-group and never someone who's been in the position of a teacher or caretaker."

One morning, just after Ju'lette and Tassos had finished their breakfast, Aleeza came into their room.

"Hi, Aleeza. Where's Julietta?" Ju'lette said.

"This is her first time in the infant group without me. I'm so nervous that I thought I'd come over and talk to the two of you."

"I'm sure she'll be okay," Ju'lette said, even though she had no idea if that was true. "What would you like to talk about?"

"Well, you've told me that you don't have any sexual initiation rites in your cultures, so I thought you could tell me about your first experiences."

"Mine was at a party, when I was fifteen," Ju'lette answered. "It was at my friend Nicol'par's house. Her parents weren't home. We were doing a slow dance, which really wasn't much more than holding each other tight and grinding

against each other. Got everyone really hot. I felt his erection pressing against me and my nipples pressing against his chest and it was driving me crazy.

“Then Nicol’par turned the lights real low. Couples started drifting apart, some went to other rooms but some of us just stayed where we were.

“Braydon pulled me down to the floor and started taking my clothes off, but he was fumbling around so I did it myself. Then I felt his naked body pressing against mine and I wanted him so badly. He was a year older than me and very muscular for his age. I don’t think it was his first time because he got into me so easily. We could tell that the other couples were doing the same thing. I think that made it even more exciting.”

Aleeza nodded then in understanding. “Was it good?”

Ju’lette smiled at the memory. “Yeah, it was good. It was very exciting. And then I felt so grown up, no longer being a virgin.”

“Did you really like the boy?”

Ju’lette shrugged. “No more or less than anyone else in my circle of friends. I just happened to be dancing with Braydon when the lights went out.”

“That’s how I felt until I met Densan,” Aleeza said. Then she turned to Tassos: “Was your first time like that?”

“Not at all,” Tassos answered. “We didn’t even have parties, much less parties without parental supervision at that age.”

“Won’t you tell me about it?” Aleeza asked. Tassos hesitated and started to turn red.

“Are you feeling well Tassos?” Aleeza asked. “Your face is such a strange color.”

“There’s nothing wrong with him,” Ju’lette answered. “That’s just how humans look when they’re embarrassed.”

“I don’t understand this embarrassment. Everyone has to have a first time.”

“He’s already told me the story and he just doesn’t think you’d understand. Your culture is so different,” Ju’lette said. Then she turned to Tassos: “It’s okay darling. Just tell her about it.”

Tassos took a deep breath. “Okay. Following a tradition in our culture, on my sixteenth birthday, my father took me to a prostitute.”

“What’s a prostitute?” Aleeza asked.

“That’s a woman a man pays to have sex with him,” Tassos answered.

“I don’t understand. Why do you have to pay her?”

“That’s her job — the way she earns money to support herself.”

“But why did you have to pay a woman? Couldn’t you find a woman who wanted to have sex with you?”

“It’s hard for me to explain, Aleeza. You have to understand my culture. Women of my class were supposed to be virgins when they got married. So men went to prostitutes for sex outside of marriage. “

“So except for Ju’lette, you’ve only had sex with these women you have to pay?”

“No. That was the only time I’ve ever been to a prostitute. Things have loosened up somewhat since then, so when I got older I was able to have sexual

relations with women of my own class. I just had to be careful not to get such a woman pregnant, because I'd have had to marry her — and after meeting Ju'lette I couldn't love anyone else.”

“So, these prostitutes are just for young men,” Aleeza said.

“No, I'm afraid my father had been a customer at the brothel.”

“What's a brothel?”

“That's where the prostitutes live and work. Higher class prostitutes, that is. The ones who aren't so good just walk the streets — but no man of my class would've used one of those pathetic women.”

“I still don't understand,” Aleeza said. “Why did your father need a prostitute when he was married?”

“My mother is a wonderful woman. She's very loving and takes excellent care of the whole family. But she's not very sexually exciting.”

“Did your mother know about the prostitutes? For you and your father?”

“I think she knew. But she pretended not to.”

“This reminds me a lot of the situation on Nova Iberia,” Ju'lette said. “I once overheard two men talking. One was telling the other how religious his wife was and how cold she was in bed — only wanting to have sex in order to have children.”

“Yeah. My mother is also very religious.”

“And of course Don Alfonso went to prostitutes because he was a very cruel man and could do whatever he wanted with them. He used sex as a means to

have power over women, and he knew he couldn't control me." Ju'lette shuddered with the memory.

"Were all the men on Nova Iberia like him?" Aleeza asked.

"Oh no. Gabriel, the man Liz'bet was indentured to, wasn't like that at all. He had his wife, whom he was kind to even though he didn't love her, and he had Liz'bet, whom he loved. And that was plenty for him."

"Why did he marry his wife?"

"I think for the advantages of being allied with her family," Ju'lette answered.

"Same thing on Andros," Tassos said. "Until recently, most marriages in the upper and merchant classes were for family alliances and economic advantage. That's another reason there are prostitutes. But in the more traditional brothels, the prostitutes were also highly educated – they knew things like the Suda and could converse with men on their own level."

"The Suda?"

"A sort of compendium of ancient knowledge, brought from old Earth — history, poetry and drama. Wives weren't supposed to be interested in things like that. They weren't supposed to be interested in business or politics, either, or anything outside the household. Of course, Kalla had a lot to do with changing that, just by setting an example. But the change came a lot faster after she led our defense against the Empire."

Aleeza was silent for a moment. She obviously didn't want to be reminded of the Aureans.

"Ju'lette, do you have prostitutes on Velor?" she finally asked.

“No. No need for them. We’re pretty free sexually and we can control our fertility so there’s no problem there.”

“So what about the women on Andros?”

“In the old days, a woman lost her virginity on her wedding night,” Tassos said. “And that’s still true for the more religious women. But now, many of the more modern women will have sex before they’re married. Sometimes with the man who they’ll marry and sometimes with a man they hope to marry. Very few will admit that the sex is only casual, so they’ll act as if they love the man, even if it’s not really true.

“A couple of times a woman I was having a sexual affair with thought I wanted to marry her — it was really awkward. One woman accused me of leading her on, said that she wouldn’t have had sex with me if she knew I wouldn’t marry her. But I was always careful not to imply that I wanted to get married. It was all in her head.”

Now Aleeza looked at the chronometer in the room. “I’ve enjoyed talking to you so much I didn’t realize it’s time to pick up Juletta.”

As she was about to leave the room, Aleeza turned around and said: “Tassos, I forgot to ask if your first time was good.”

Tassos thought a minute. “It was strange. I was so eager and excited that I came as soon as my penis touched her body. I was terribly embarrassed. But she was really very kind and understanding. She told me to play with her breasts and suck her nipples and before long I was excited again. And then she guided me into her body and told me how to move and when I got close to coming she

got me to slow down and make it last. When I finally came it was wonderful. She told me that I did very well — like a real man. I felt very proud. And I've always been grateful to her. It's just that ...”

“Just what?” Aleeza asked.

“It would've been even more wonderful if she hadn't been a prostitute. Just an older woman who liked to initiate young boys. In that respect, Aleeza, your culture is much better than ours. I'm sure the boy you initiate will be very lucky.”

“Thank you, Tassos. I'll do my best.”

6. Wild River Youthworld

Ju'lette stepped out of the *Far Wanderer* with a great feeling of relief. It was wonderful to once more feel a planet beneath her feet. She took a deep breath — the fresh air felt wonderful. She felt Tassos grip her hand and turned to look at him. She saw a big grin on his face.

Shushna had told them how beautiful the planet was, but so far all she could see was the beauty of the sky. Spaceports were built for functionality, not to show off the beauty of the surroundings.

Ju'lette had been concerned about her reception on this world, remembering Meetpoint 17, where the Scalantrans had wanted her out of sight and out of mind. But Shushna had assured her that Captain Marpolom had taken care of everything.

“We had to arrange things quickly,” she had related. “The idea of non-Scalantrans coming *here*, let alone interacting with.... we had to explain it at

great length to the captains of the other ships and the administrators as we were making our approach; some of them took a good deal of convincing, but we won them over.”

The departing cohort had already disembarked and were being taken to their school via groundcars. Shushna disembarked right after Ju’lette and Tassos. She herded them towards a groundcar meant for about twenty Scalantrans. She’d explained to them that they would have to stand up for the trip since the seats were not suitable for humans. When the groundcar was full, it began the trip to the town that included the school.

The crew of the *Far Wanderer* would be staying in the guest houses, separated by mate-group. Shushna had been apologetic when discussing the accommodations. “I’m sorry,” she’d said. “But there isn’t any place suitable for humans.” Ju’lette had assured her that they could sleep outside, that they’d actually enjoy it.

When they got to the town, Ju’lette was happy to see that there was a wooded area on the outskirts — a perfect place to spend their nights. The buildings of the town were low to the ground, no more than two stories high. The colors were all neutral and blended into their surroundings. The roads were paved, but their color was a reddish-brown, like the ground where there was no vegetation.

Shushna arranged with them for a meeting place the next morning and then went to join her mate-group.

Ju'lette and Tassos waited until all the Scalantrans had arrived and then walked to the woods. The trees were very tall and deciduous. It was early Autumn in the region and the leaves were just starting to change colors. They walked together, hand in hand, and when they came to a spot that was far from prying eyes they removed their clothes. The cool air on their naked bodies felt wonderful.

Ju'lette found a small clearing, lay down on the ground and rolled around.

"What are you doing?" Tassos asked.

"I want to feel the earth all over my body."

"Is that all you want to feel?"

"No," she said, laughing. "I also want to feel you inside me."

"Happy to oblige."

"Harder," Ju'lette said when she was filled with his cock. "As hard as you can — don't hold back. It's wonderful not to have to worry about denting a bulkhead or shaking their ship."

Tassos lovingly pounded her into the ground and Ju'lette responded just as furiously. When they came, they screamed ecstatically, not caring if the far off Scalantrans heard them.

They continued long into the night, exalting in the feeling of freedom the open air of the planet gave them. Finally they fell asleep in each other's arms.

They woke by the first light of the sun and freshened up in a nearby creek. Then they went to meet Shushna.

Shushna showed them around the town and then took them over to the school. The school was situated a short distance from the town. It consisted of several small buildings in a park-like setting.

Shushna showed them the classrooms and laboratories, which they both agreed weren't very different from those on the *Far Wanderer* except that they were bigger and had large windows to let the sunshine in.

Then Shushna took them to meet with some of the teachers. Ju'lette and Tassos gave them a summary of what they had taught the cohort about human culture and art, subjects that were not in the normal Scalantry curriculum.

"This will be a new situation," one of the teachers said. "Our students can teach us things."

Then the teachers spent some time asking Ju'lette and Tassos questions, trying to expand their own knowledge. When they had to end the session and return to their duties, the teachers thanked them profusely.

When they were walking back to the town, Ju'lette asked Shushna: "Who are the people here? Why are they here instead of on a ship?"

"Some of them like the planet so much that they decide to stay after graduation and never go to a ship. Some either don't like ship's life or decide to try living on a planet for a while. A lot of the teachers are older and, like Jonjerem, have retired from ship's life."

"If they've been on a ship, are they always allowed to go to a planet if they want to?" Tassos asked.

“If they’re really a bad fit for the ship, everyone is happy to see them go. And of course, it depends on how crucial their job is for the ship and if there’s someone to take their place. Usually something can be worked out. We’ve had people happy to get back to a ship after spending some time working on a planet.”

“Speaking of Jonjerem, where will he be teaching?” Ju’lette asked.

“He’s going to teach at an advanced school quite a ways from here. He’s flying there tomorrow.”

“I hope we’ll get a chance to say goodbye to him,” Tassos said.

“You’ll be able to do more than that. He’s asked that you come with him and speak to the students there.”

Ju’lette looked at Tassos and he nodded his head. “We’d be happy to,” she said. “But neither of us are teachers. I don’t think either of us would be comfortable giving a lecture.”

“You could just give a short talk and then answer questions. Would that be all right?”

“I think we could manage that. As long as they don’t expect too much from us.”

“I’m sure that just seeing humans speak Scalantran as well as you do will impress them. I’ll be going with you and I’ll introduce you and explain who you are and what you’ve done for Scalantrans.”

“When do we go?” Tassos asked.

“Tomorrow.”

Densan was here to say his farewell to Jonjerem. They might never meet again, he knew. Not for a long time, at any rate. But the retiring historian wouldn't let it be only a sentimental parting.

His mentor had been drilling him ever since they'd left Andros, where he had decided there was too little time to investigate retirement opportunities after having gotten caught up in the crisis talks with Kalla. Real history in the making!

But it wasn't enough to have all the facts at his command. The books were full of those. He had to bring history to life.

"Extemporize," Jonjerem said now. "The short history."

Densan could not be caught off-guard; he launched right into it, beginning with the Swarming that had brought the Scalantrans to this galaxy — telling an age-old story, and yet telling it his own way.

In the meaning and the rhythm of his words, he caught the essence of their encounters with the strange warm-blooded races of the Outer Reaches, their cold counterparts like the Pacts, the secretive shipwrights and weaponmakers of Vendor, the elusive Elders and Galen and their children the Diaboli and the Supremis, and, finally the ordinary humans with whom they had built most of their trade — at the sufferance of the Galen and their Seeders.

It was all there, but as in every oration, it was updated, reconsidered and reappraised, as it always would be. For history was a living thing — right up to the present. When Densan reached that point, he added the traditional: "And here I pause."

“We live in disturbing times,” Jonjerem said, after a moment. “Too disturbing for me, I’m afraid. That’s why I’m here.”

“The *Far Wanderer* has a rich history,” Densan said, changing the subject. “I only hope that I can be as worthy of recording and teaching it as you were.”

“You have done well. Not all have, perhaps. Did you know that the Aureans tested their new weapon in the Ostrog system seven subgenerations ago? *Seven* subgenerations, and word has only just reached us here.”

“Ostrog is quite distant, after all.”

“Not too distant for the Aureans. But then they can stand higher accelerations — which explains why it took them barely five subgenerations to return to base, produce the GAR in quantity, and deploy it on Tanzrobi.”

“We heard about that at Andros,” Densan recalled.

“And you’ll hear more about it before long. The *Spirit of Youth* left a sealed message here for Marpolom. Eyes only, but what else could it be about?”

“Captain Marpolom was advised, as soon as we landed,” Densan said. “But he hasn’t told the rest of us anything.”

“Disturbing news, I expect. History is catching up with us. Not our history, *their* history.”

Densan said nothing, but his expression signaled that he understood.

“We’ve been here so much longer than they have, trading with species they don’t even know about in the Outer Reaches,” Jonjerem continued. “But none like *them*. And, of course, none like the Supremis.”

“The Galen....”

“And their Seeders. All these seeded worlds they created, with which we have long enjoyed a profitable trade. But the Galen surely never planned this for *our* benefit. And I can’t see what they themselves get out of it.”

“They hoped to get something out of the Velorians, so the story goes,” Densan ventured.

“Yet they were involved with Terrans long before they created the Velorians.”

“Who would have remained where they were, unknown to the rest of the Galaxy, but for us. ”

“Indeed,” agreed Jonjerem. “As the seeded worlds would have been forever isolated from one another, but for us.”

“At *their* invitation,”

“The Aureans might never have become empire builders, but for us. We cannot hold the Galen to account for *that*.””

They hardly needed to mention the First Strike.

“So the past comes back to haunt us, and cast its shadow over the future,” Jonjerem continued. “Should we now become secret agents of the Velorians, as Kalla proposed?”

“Velor itself appears to be indifferent. That is why Ju’lette—“

“I was *there* at Nova Iberia, when she came aboard, after she helped save us. But perhaps Velor itself doesn’t matter. I expect to see the seeded worlds draw together themselves in their mutual interest. Can Kalla be the only Companion to have thought of that? I doubt it.”

“And where does that leave us?” Densan wondered.

“As I said, in disturbing times. If I had known a few subgenerations ago what I know now, I’d have recommended arming the *Far Wanderer* with a Vendorian Star-Laz. That’s what the *Spirit of Youth* did, and it served them well at Tanzrobi, or we would never have heard their tale.”

“That’s what it’s come to?”

“What did you *expect*?”

The flight would take a little less than half a local day and took off early in the morning. Besides the four in their party, there were eight people going to a scientific seminar.

Shushna and Jonjerem both tried to explain the nature of the scientific field but gave up as none of them had the proper scientific background. The scientists kept to themselves and spoke rapidly, using jargon unfamiliar to Shushna or Jonjerem.

The plane took off from the airfield and flew over the town. Ju’lette looked out and exclaimed: “The town blends in so well that if I didn’t know it was there I’d have missed it.”

Shushna nodded. “That’s the whole idea.”

Ju’lette and Tassos enjoyed looking out the window, soaking in the natural beauty of the planet. About midway through the trip, they flew over a river which flowed in wide arcs through mountainous country, sometimes widening and then narrowing, rushing wildly down rocky slopes forming white-water rapids and many times plunging steeply down, forming cascading waterfalls.

“That’s it,” Shushna said, the excitement evident in her voice. “That’s the wild river the planet’s named for.

“It’s wonderful,” Ju’lette said. “We have nothing like it on Velor.”

“Or anywhere else that we know of,” Shushna said. “You’re seeing just the upper reaches. It’s wild all the way to the sea. It cut a canyon through the coastal range millions of generations ago. Much later, there was subsidence of the inland plain above the range that left an escarpment, over which the water now rushes in the highest falls you’re ever likely to see. You can understand why we named the world for it.”

“We have to visit there.” She exchanged a knowing look with Tassos.

“Oh, there’s no way we can get you there,” Shushna said. “The nearest place to land is a two day hike from anyplace on the river and we don’t have time for that.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to get us there. Tassos and I can get there on our own.”

“Marpolom had the hard part, assuring your welcome here,” Jonjerem told Ju’lette and Tassos after greeting them at the advanced school. “Now Shushna — teachers here still remember her from her student days — has the easy part: introducing two heroes.”

“Heroes?” Tassos asked.

“Well, Marpolom thought it best for you two to share the credit. Anyway, once she makes her introductions, you needn’t expect any trouble. I’ve prepared

some visual aids, you both speak our language well enough to cue them -- just use the active case for the subject at hand and the program will understand.”

And so it did. No sooner had Tassos explained that he came from a world called Andros than an image of that world sprang into the air over the assembly, rotating in place, showing the land and sea in their true colors, from the Northern Reach to the Southern Isles. He felt a pang of homesickness at the sight. Scalantrans had no homes but their ships...

Faces of the Patriarchs came into view as Tassos gave an outline of his world's history. Most were bearded, some were handsome, some were ugly. He spoke of art and architecture, and the students saw the mosaics and the old cathedrals and the Megalos Synodos for themselves. And of course, he told about Kalla, whose image — like that of Helen of Troy — could have launched a thousand ships. Not that the Scalantran males could properly appreciate that.

It came time for Ju'lette to take the podium, and she wasn't surprised when images of Velor and Erin'lah appeared as she briefly told her life's story. There were even some, although from before her time there, of Nova Iberia. A brief recording showed her teaching martial arts aboard the *Far Wanderer*.

That last seemed to puzzle them, and the first question had to do with that — what was it, and what use was it? Other questions were fairly routine — matters of trade and export markets. Tassos went further into the history of mosaics, while Ju'lette tried to convey a sense of just what it was that made Companions appealing to the Terrans of the seeded worlds — and so lucrative to the Scalantrans. It went on like that for hours. But then...

“You look familiar somehow,” said one student, staring at Tassos. “Burisem — late of the *Sun Treader*. There was a man like you we picked up at Ishtar, only he—“

“What?” Tassos had a vague inkling what he might be talking about.

“I think we’re running out of time,” Jonjerem interrupted. “Thank you all very much for your attention.”

“We should all show our appreciation for Tassos and Ju’lette,” Shushna added.

Scalantrans don’t applaud, but they murmured their appreciation before they began filing out.

“What was that all about?” Tassos asked Jonjerem.

“Somebody talking out of turn. Only senior officers have been informed of your true nature. The matter will have to be dealt with. But I think you can guess who he was talking about.”

Tassos’ inkling became a certainty. He looked at Ju’lette, and saw that she too understood.

“We look after him, in return for services rendered. He has an All World Travel Pass.”

“An All World pass?” Ju’lette asked.

“Wherever he wants to go, whenever he wants to go, we take him.”

“You never told us?” said Tassos.

“Why should we?” Jonjerem retorted rather tartly. “He values his privacy. And if Velor were to find out... it could cause problems, because of our

involvement. Especially the *Sun Treader's*, of which I'll say no more. I appeal to you to do the same."

"No other Terrans will learn of this," Tassos assured him, suddenly abashed.

"Nor Kalla," Ju'lette added. "What would be the point? But if she knew you were helping Alexius, I'm sure she'd be grateful."

"We are indebted to him, as we are indebted to you," Jonjerem said. "We pay our debts. We earn our trust."

"We'll be leaving here in ten local days," Shushna informed the travelers now.

"So soon?" Ju'lette said.

"We usually stay much longer and give everyone a chance to relax on the planet. But we're so far behind schedule that we have to deny ourselves that luxury. In any case, we have no need to recruit new crew members, having done so already at Meetpoint. Enjoy yourselves while you can. It's still a long trip."

"We will," Ju'lette promised.

And then it was time to say farewell to Jonjerem.

"I will miss you, of course," he said. "But I will have my students. And I will have my history to write. You'll be part of it, of course, which is something I could never have imagined in my youth. I suppose you may be part of it for generations to come. No doubt I'll hear about the next chapters from Densan. He is doing well, and may be of use to you as well as the *Far Wanderer*."

Clutching Tassos tightly to her body, Ju'lette descended to the rocky banks of the Wild River. Work was over. Now it was time for play.

After Ju'lette and Tassos had given their pledge that they'd be back in time and made their farewells to the Scalantrans, they set off discreetly by foot. When they got far enough away, they wrapped their arms around each other and Ju'lette took off and together they flew to the river.

Now they landed on the rocky banks of a part of the river where it was wide, deep in the middle and fairly placid. The plan was to enjoy it as it gradually grew wilder, culminating in what the Scalantrans called Highest Falls. They took off their clothes and left them by a large, smooth rock which Tassos jokingly said looked like Ju'lette buttocks — a landmark they would surely remember.

Ju'lette waded into the river, delighting in the icy chill that greeted her. She felt strong currents which were not evident from the riverbanks. Fish of all shapes and sizes darted around them. She looked back, beckoning Tassos.



The thought of being here with Ju'lette excited Tassos — something that could not happen to a normal man. He plunged in after her, following her into deeper waters, over their heads. Then he plunged into her, their feet firmly on the river bottom, their bodies moving together while resisting the river's currents. When they were about to come, Ju'lette pushed off and they rose out of the river together, like two river gods coming up to see the world.

They spent days exploring the river. They particularly enjoyed the white water rapids. Sometimes they went over them singly, one watching the other. They learned to control their descent over rapids instead of just being tossed about in ways that would have killed an ordinary human.

Then they were ready to try it while making love. By then, they'd had enough experience to be able to control their progress over the rapids and still concentrate on the sexual experience. The exhilaration of going over the rapids while making love was almost too much. Ju'lette came quickly — and over and over again. She could see the look of ecstasy on Tassos' face. Their cries of love could be heard over the roar of the water — but there was no one but themselves to hear it.

The best they saved for last — going over Highest Falls. First they spent some time just admiring it. It was as magnificent as Shushna had said. The sound of the Falls was louder than anything they had ever heard or could imagine.

Then they went over it, their arms and legs wrapped around each other, his cock firmly inside her. The descent was rapid. They screamed with joy at the thrill of it. When they reached bottom, they made their way to shore. They lay together for a while, just listening to the grandeur of the Falls.

Then they made slow love, the thunder of the Falls and the depth of the river a fitting reflection of the power and depth of their love.

“No one else,” Tassos said. “No one else has ever done this. Only we. Only we can love like this.”

They spent several days at the Falls, just enjoying being there, enjoying being together. The days were glorious, with the sun beating down on the Falls. At night they gazed at the stars, wondering where Velor was, wondering how long it would be before they finally got there.

Then it was time to leave. They flew back to the beginning of their river journey and retrieved their clothes from what they'd named Buttocks Rock. Then they flew back to meet Shushna.

"Did you enjoy Wild River?" she asked.

They both smiled. "Yes. Beyond our wildest dreams."

7. Another Detour

When Travel Captain Marpolom told Ju'lette about yet another change of course, she was furious.

"I've been blindsided," she told him.

"I too have been 'blindsided,'" Marpolom responded after she had explained the meaning of the word. "And yet it may well be to your advantage as well as ours. The Azizi we are to retrieve have first-hand knowledge of the new weapons that the Aureans have deployed. Such knowledge is essential to both our peoples."

"How long will this delay our arrival at Velor?"

"A subgeneration."

More than a year. Ju'lette worked it out instantly in her head.

"Which meetpoint?"

"None. And none of the worlds we call on. We have been given coordinates for a rendezvous in deep space, off any of the trade routes."

"They certainly took their sweet time about this!" Ju'lette protested. "It's been more than three subgenerations since the attack on Tanzrobi."

“It wasn’t deliberate,” Marpolom tried to explain. “They decided to leave their own trade route to make an unscheduled stop at Meetpoint 22, in order to bring word to as many other ships as possible. That took time. They had thought to transfer their charges to another ship, but none were bound for Velor, or willing to undertake a mission there.”

“So why didn’t they go themselves?”

“Their Cohort was due, and they were running late to the Youthworld. When they heard that we were on our way there, they left a message for me. The *Spirit of Youth* wants to get back to its schedule and maintain its reputation. And since we are off schedule and headed for Velor in any case, they concluded that we have little or nothing to lose.”

“Very generous of them.”

“As a matter of fact, they *have* been generous. In return for our assistance, they have offered a letter of credit to cover all our debts and give us a good start in restoring our own trade route.”

Ju’lette was impressed, but still concerned.

“Time. We still have time to lose.”

“And witnesses and allies to gain.”

“They had better be worth it,” Ju’lette said,

She reproached herself for that, later, when she was with Tassos.

“They’ve sacrificed their trade for me,” she said. “For us.”

“It’s in their interest, too. Their long-term interest.”

“They can’t be sure of that. They can’t be sure we’ll accomplish anything.”

“You saved their ship,” Tassos pointed out.

“It was Liz’bet’s idea. And, after all, they did the rest themselves after we took out the cruisers. If they’d had Vendorian weapons, they could have done the whole job themselves.”

“They don’t regret what they’re doing. Why should you?”

8. Rendezvous

Marpolom had been briefed about the new passengers, including the Aurean, and he in turn had briefed Ju’lette. Even so, she hadn’t known what to expect.

Tanzrobians, she had been told, all had dark skin. But when they appeared in the reception area that the *Far Wanderer* had prepared for them – Ju’lette had not witnessed their actual boarding – they seemed as different as... well, Nova Iberians and Androssians.

Zanele, the *asaba* warrior, carried herself proudly in her nakedness, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. *Masaba*, Ju’lette knew, were the most powerful and invulnerable of the Azizi, as the Tanzrobians called themselves — the equivalent of a Velorian Prima like herself, or an Aurean Prime. It was she who had slain the Aurean satrap of the village where she had been guardian — with the very weapon that had been used against her mate, the weapon that had so frightened the Scalantrans.

Mbali, who had been the wife of a village leader and inherited his position by default after he was killed during the invasion, was accompanied by Kobe who had also been widowed in the invasion. He and Mbali had fallen in love while conspiring to kill the Prime who controlled their village. They considered themselves husband and wife even though there was no one to perform such a ceremony.

Kobe was plainly dressed in a simple tunic. But Mbali herself was attired in some outlandish outfit that the *Spirit of Youth* had put together from Azizi trade good samples and Skietra knew what else.



“They thought it might impress your authorities,” Marpolom said.

"It's ridiculous," Ju'lette said with a huff.

Still, she was reluctant to second-guess the Scalantrans. Nobody on Velor had ever seen an Azizi, so how could the High Council or the Senate have any idea what was their appropriate dress?

It was up to Marpolom to make the formal introductions, beginning with Mbali, who was first in rank if not in strength.

"How do you do?" Ju'lette asked Mbali, the safest thing she could think of.

"I am well," the Azizi woman said in accented Scalantran. "Except for these ridiculous clothes."

Ju'lette tried and failed to suppress a laugh

Kobe, who evidently didn't know Scalantran, whispered an inquiry to her. Whatever her response was made him laugh. Which in turn made Mbali laugh, and that broke the ice.

"Don't feel badly," Mbali reassured her. "It has been a long time since either of us has had cause to laugh."

No sooner had Marpolom introduced her to Zanele than the warrior reached out and squeezed her breasts -- hard. Ju'lette was startled, but returned the gesture.

"*You* have that custom?" she asked.

"From the same source, it would appear," she responded in Velorian. "But your kind received it far later."

"But why?"

“Perhaps it began as a recognition signal among the... supremis, as you call them: ‘My breasts are as invulnerable as yours. Therefore we are of the same people, and must honor one another as such.’”

“Yet the men don’t do the same with—“

“On our world they do—did, in the early years.”

“Only the *masaba*,” Mbali was at pains to clarify.

“Really?” Zanele countered. “I always thought...”

This is getting embarrassing, Ju’lette thought. Fortunately, Marpolom – who probably didn’t know dick about any of this – came to the rescue.

“We should repair to the conference room,” he said. “We have a great deal to discuss.”

There was another party waiting for them there, wearing a gold collar and shackled to the table, hand and foot.

Pimponeus was his name, and he had been some sort of functionary under Tschokke, the Prime who had ruled her village on Tanzrobi. Zanele had taken him captive on a mere whim, she had explained, but he might have bought them some time later when their stolen yacht was challenged by an Aurean cruiser. Or he might have betrayed them — nobody was sure.

“Take me to the nearest Imperial planet immediately!” he shouted in crude Velorian when he saw Ju’lette enter the room. “There will be no mercy for you otherwise!”

Ju’lette looked at Marpolom and the others,

“He’s been saying that to everybody,” the Travel Captain told her.

“It’s been the same with us,” Mbali added. “We had to keep him gagged most of the way.”

9. Zanele’s Tale

"The Aurean commander in our district was a fool to begin with," Zanele said. "But I made of him a bigger fool, or we would not have made our escape."

Though Mbali Ndlovu had been welcomed as a plenipotentiary by the Scalantrans — about as official a recognition as she was ever likely to get, even on distant Velor — it was Zanele Oweaba who had arranged their escape, and who could best tell the story.

Ju'lette paid special attention, for she felt that the fate of her own mission might be tied to that of the Tanzrobians. Tassos had already paid his own special attention -- but felt embarrassed by his reaction to the dusky warrior's naked beauty.

No fool she, Ju'lette had taken that in, before Zanele began to speak, but tried to make light of it: “Looking for some new excitement?” she’d asked.

“Me? What about you, with your stories of threesomes and foursomes and moresomes?”

It was Ju'lette’s turn to be embarrassed – and make a tart response.

“She might not be safe with you. If you know what I mean.”

Tassos knew what she meant, and that dampened his ardor. The thought that he might harm a woman — even kill her...

Anyway, he and Ju'lette hadn't yet run out of ways, or places, to share their lust...

Now Marpolom too was watching with rapt attention, heedless of the temptations or fantasies of the supremis. So was his counterpart, Trade Captain Dowjem. And Densan, the new historian, was in deep study, knowing that it was his duty not only to set down an accurate account, but interpret it for future generations of the *Far Wanderer*. He would have to find the right words, in his language, distilled from the words now spoken by the Tanzrobian.

Zanele had been deep-taught in Velorian, which was known to Scalantrans of their rank through a trade relationship now more than 300 years old, but she sprinkled her account with native terms that had no exact equivalents.

"In our villages, the most powerful of our kind, known as the *masaba*, were traditionally the guardians. It was they who defended the rest if they were threatened by a lion or other predatory beast gone mad, or a natural calamity, or — never expected — an invasion.

"When the Aureans came, we treated them like mad beasts, and we killed a great many of them — Betas and even Primes. Yet we could attack them only on the ground, having no powers of flight, whereas they could also attack from the air and even from space with their fearsome weapons, incinerating entire villages, destroying our herds and leaving us without sustenance."

This much even Tassos knew, from the account Lady Kalla and the Scalantran Factor General had shared back on Andros. Only he hadn't known

then that the *Far Wanderer* would be diverted once again in order to bring eyewitnesses to Velor, rather than mere second-hand reports.

“And then they unleashed their most terrible weapon. It seemed so small, of no account at all compared to the explosive and incendiary bombs. I was with my mate Thabo when the Aureans came to our village. Betas all; easy work for us, Thabo said, and together we could take them out.

“But one aimed his device at my fellow warrior, my mate — he glowed bright as the sun for a moment, and fell dead, horribly burned. I was able to avenge him, for the killer was slow of foot and overconfident as well, and I was able to kill him and retrieve his weapon. Yet my seeming victory turned bitter, for I knew that we now faced an enemy we could never defeat — not in the long run. And so it was in other villages, and along other trails.”

That was what had scared Ju'lette, when she had heard only the purport of it. Contrary to what she had suggested to Tassos, an *asaba* was equivalent to a Prima or an Aurean Prime. Zanele would be in no danger from Tassos in bed — but if she were in danger of death from this new weapon, then so were the Companions. Herself. Kalla. Thousands of others across the Terran worlds of the Galaxy.

“Our leaders came at last to see that further resistance could mean only suicide, and so they bowed to the inevitable. Yet some village leaders, including Mbali, were not prepared to abandon the struggle. She knew that we must look to the skies for our help, for if even the Galen had failed us perhaps their other children would heed our voices — if only we could make them heard.”

*Not just for her sake, but for **ours**, Ju'lette reflected. If we fail her people, we fail all others — perhaps even our own.*

"Mbali is but an *apili*, lesser than a Beta. Yet it was she who conceived our plan, and made me part of it. Because I was *asaba*, a match for a Prime in strength and invulnerability, I had caught the eye of their local commander, who had erected his headquarters in the center of our new village."

Now that Tassos knew the truth about Zanele. Ju'lette glanced at him, but saw that he was alarmed rather than pleased — that he must be afraid for her and for himself, after having believed since his enhancement that nothing ever again could threaten them and the happiness they had found.

"Like others of his kind, Tschokke looked upon us with a curious mixture of contempt and fascination. How could the Galen have created such an impure people as ourselves? That they had not intervened on our behalf convinced his kind that our makers had realized the error of their ways and therefore abandoned us.

"But like all arrogant males, especially Aureans, he couldn't help but think with his cock. He imagined that cock was a weapon with which to conquer me, body and soul. I allowed him to think as much, to imagine that he was draining me of my will with his every thrust. But he wasn't draining me; I was draining *him*, his wits as well as his cock, planning with Mbali the while to regain our freedom.

"Freedom! Oh, I felt so free when he took me flying in his yacht, too besotted with me to know that I was observing all the procedures, memorizing all the codes, while learning the Aurean language from that greater fool Pimponeous –

all the better to flatter his master, I'd given him to believe. For I knew that soon I could win freedom, and that of a few others, to carry our appeal to the Scalantrans and even to Velor.

“Because they thought we were primitive, the Aureans thought that we took no account of time. Yet we had always known how to plan for each season by the sun and the moons and the stars. The Scalantrans had taught us the schedule of their comings and goings. We knew precisely when the next trading ship was due. Perhaps the Aureans did too, but they would never expect us to meet that ship at the wormhole.

“The yacht was designed for stupid people like Tschokke, who knew little or nothing of astrogation. It was easy to plot a course for the wormhole, and none challenged us until we had nearly reached our goal. And so it came to pass.... “

Marpolom was becoming impatient, and broke in at this point.

“It is the weapon that concerns us, and will concern the Velorians,” he said.

If Zanele could have turned darker than she was from embarrassment, she would have done so.

“Alas, as I was about to say, it was left behind during the confusion of our transfer from the yacht, after the Aurean cruiser had attacked.”

“Then let us hope your testimony will be convincing, nonetheless.”

10. Surprise from the Skies

Factor General Opara couldn't believe her ears when she heard the sound of a ship landing at the trade port outside. When she looked outside, she couldn't believe her eyes. Everyone in her mate group was just as astounded.

It was only 1013-7-0272. The *Galactic Roamer*, with a consignment of Lottery Boys from Madstop, exotic fabrics from Qitai, and electronic and machine tools from several worlds, wasn't due for another 147 shifts.

The latest class of Companions hadn't nearly finished its training, and the commandant of the Academy would be upset — especially since the training was so much more intense now. How could this have happened, and why had there been no radio contact with her office?

Only when the ship came to ground, it turned out that it was not the *Galactic Roamer*, but rather the *Far Wanderer*. That was even more unbelievable: the *Far Wanderer* had never called here before, but there had been word that it had missed stops on its regular route. Nothing had been heard from the ship for subgenerations. The captain. What was his name? She consulted her comp before going out to meet the ship. Ah, Marpolom...

That must be him now, she surmised as she approached the ship. But emerging from the ramp with him were the oddest-looking humans she had ever seen. Their skin was dark brown — she'd heard of such, but never expected to see any. There was also a Velorian woman, who looked strangely familiar, and an outworlder accompanying her. There was a dark-haired man — could it actually be an *Aurean*? — under restraint by some of the crew members.

Opara was about to question Marpolom about all this when they came face to face, but — ignoring protocol — he spoke first.

“We need to speak in private, about grave matters. *Very* grave.’

“The Imperial consulate will hear of this!” the dark-haired stranger interrupted.

“Never mind him,” Marpolom said. “He has an exaggerated sense of his importance. Still, he may have his uses.”

* * *

The office of the Factor General, like the Academy of Companions, was on what was called the far side of Erin’lah — yet still short of the near-zero gold field over the uranium layer.

Not that the uranium posed any danger to either the Scalantrans or ordinary humans: it was too far underground. But the High Council had wanted to make a good impression, and to keep Velorians who worked on the moon under a measure of control: a 50% gold field was better than 10%.

“They never told Kalla and the others what it meant to live outside a gold field,” Ju’lette was explaining to Zanele and the other Azizi; Tassos had learned the whole story on his first trip here. “They never even told the Scalantrans. Maybe they were afraid to. Or maybe some of them — the ones in charge — didn’t even know.”

“Can you feel it?” Zanele asked.

“It’s not that I feel weak. It’s just that I know I can’t fly here, or run as fast, or lift as much, as I could on other worlds. It’s rather like the governors on

Androssian ground cars that won't let them go beyond a certain speed, no matter how much you try to accelerate."

That took some further explaining, as none of the Azizi had ever seen a ground car.

"Don't you think it strange for a planet to have a gold core?" asked Mbali, who from her dealings with the Scalantrans had gotten a smattering of education about the nature of the universe even before leaving Tanzrobi.

"Of course," Ju'lette said. "Everyone who thinks about it knows that. But not everyone thinks about it. Knowing what lies beyond — and people find out, even though the Council and the Senate don't want them to — makes it a painful subject."

"What do *you* think?"

"Well, I don't believe that the Galen created this system — there are signs that Velor and Daxxan and their satellites are as old as most planets, geologically speaking. I suppose it's the same with Aria. And the Dimensional Transporter that used to link them — that too was very, very old. Somebody must have planned and built them. Maybe the Old Galactics or some other vanished race. We'll probably never know who, let alone why."

"There's the lake!" shouted Tassos, who hadn't been following the conversation; it was all ancient history to him. "And the sex shacks... that's what the other Lottery Boys called them."

"And what did *you* call them?" Kobe asked.

“I didn’t call them anything. I was too overwhelmed by Ju’lette. Of course, I was like the others in one respect — as soon as I knew what sex was, I wanted to make it with Kalla. I just didn’t want to talk about it.”

The others glanced at Ju’lette.

“Oh, he’s owned up to that long since,” she said. “He had good taste, at least. Only he also had a good heart.”

Tassos blushed, as if she’d said something intimately revealing. Perhaps she had.

“We’ll have to check in at the Academy,” Ju’lette added. “I’ll have to show you around — and show you off.”

Tassos turned even redder.

* * *

Travel Captain Marpolom was trying to explain things to the Factor General, and he wasn’t having an easy time of it. Opara hadn’t even let him get a word out before she laid into him.

“Your unscheduled arrival, without prior notification, violates Velor’s protocols as well as our own,” she said, as if lecturing a youngling. “You bring strange visitors, but evidently no cargo.”

“We are fortunate to have arrived at all,” Marpolom responded when. “And what we have to tell is not for the ears of anyone who might happen to be listening in, but for our own people, the High Council and the Senate. We are in great danger, and the Velorians themselves are in great danger.”

When he was finished laying it out for her, Opara was speechless for a few moments. And then....

“We received word of a reward for securing some new Aurean weapon, but seemingly only as a business opportunity. We also heard about the attack on Tanzrobi. But from different ships, and without making the connection, This is indeed a matter of the greatest urgency.”

“That is why we are here, having forsaken our trade route, having risked financial ruin. Had not the *Spirit of Youth* restored our credit in return for bringing the Tanzrobians, we might indeed be ruined. As it is, we can stay but a little while; we must endeavor to restore our trading circuit as soon as possible. But I implore you to give our passengers all the help you can. Our own future as well as theirs is at stake.”

Shaken, Opara agreed to use her good offices.

11. Lakeside Idyll

Tol’or Zanerha-Shar’a had never heard of exogamy. If he had, he would have never imagined that the Galen might have left such an instinct in their programming of the Velorians. All he knew was that when he saw Zanele Oweaba sitting by the lake, it was instant lust.

Tol’or had heard about the visitors from the day of their arrival, of course. It had been the talk of Erin’lah, the talk of the Companions in training and the instructors. He’d been busy with an erotic arts training session when one of the trainees awaiting her turn with him had gotten word of the Scalantrans’ arrival.

That in itself was unusual; the Scalantrans kept to a pretty regular schedule and this wasn't a scheduled visit. Certainly it couldn't be another shipment of Lottery Boys; the current class wasn't ready for that yet — the girls hadn't even had time to work with their dummies. What with the additional combat training, it was hard to squeeze everything in.

They might have to prolong training, in which case it might be providential that the Scalantrans were here: the Academy could work out a new schedule if need be, although it would take years for the news to work its way through the trade routes.

The news was so unprecedented that nobody was sure how to react to it: there was a returned Companion among the passengers of the *Far Wanderer*, and she had brought a... companion of her own, and of her own kind. How could this be? No Companion had ever returned before, and there weren't supposed to be any other supremis except for the Aureans and...

Then there were the visitors from a world called Tanzrobi. The word was that the Aureans had invaded their world, and that they were seeking aid from Velor. But what kind of aid, and why would they need it? For it was said that the Tanzrobians themselves — some of them at least — were supremis, the fruit of a Galen genetic engineering project that antedated Velor itself.

Curiouser and curiouser!

The Companion was Ju'lette. Tol'or remembered her from eleven years earlier. She had ranked high in her class, and had been strongly motivated. Her

own companion, it was said, had reddish brown hair. How could that be? Where could he possibly have come from?

The headmistress of the Academy had quickly clamped a lid on the whole matter: "Don't ask," she told the staff and trainees at a hastily-called assembly. "Don't tell," it was said she had already informed the visitors, and even the Scalantran trade reps.

As for the Tanzrobians, it developed that only one of them was a match for the Velorians. Mbali, the envoy, was about halfway between a frail and a Beta and her lover Kobe only a frail; at least that was what he'd heard. He'd caught a distant glimpse of Mbali; she wore some sort of ceremonial attire, which Tol'or supposed must be related to her sept or her station.

But Zanele... she was equivalent to a Prima, it was said. Unlike Mbali, she went around naked. Nudity was hardly unknown on Velor, or on Erin'lah: much of the combat training was done in the nude, and outstanding performance was often rewarded with sex. Still, clothes were the rule most of the time.

With the Tanzrobian warrior, nudity itself seemed to be the rule.

Not that there was anything deliberately seductive about her. She seemed to be as casual about her naked body as an animal. *Seemed* to be. That was how it looked at the lake, where she sat with her head raised, thinking of nothing but the sheer joy of existence. Or so it seemed.



He stood motionless, entranced by her exotic beauty, the blood rushing to his manhood. But he wasn't about to make a move. He had no idea what the sexual customs might be where she came from.

Then she turned towards him.

“You must be one of the instructors,” she said, then added with a laugh: “You certainly aren’t one of the candidates.”

She spoke in perfect Velorian; that must be from one of the Scalantran deepteach programs he’d heard about. And yet her voice had a certain... not an accent, exactly, more like a lilt.

“Tol’or Zanerha-Shar’a,” he introduced himself. “I’ve been teaching here for 20 years now.”

“Things have changed during that time, I imagine.”

“They were already beginning to change. But more so now.”

“I suppose you know who I am?”

“Zanele Oweaba. From Tanzrobi.”

“You’re allowed to know that much. But we’re not supposed to talk about why we’re here.”

“You and Ju’lette.”

“She mentioned your name.”

“I was her instructor, once.”

“So she told me. She said I should look you up. That I’d like what I’d see.”

“And?”

“I like what I see.” She stood now, and displayed herself. “Do you like what you see?”

Skietra, Tol’or thought, no longer feeling the need to conceal his admiration.

“You’re incredibly beautiful,” he said.

“Do you **want** what you see?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked, his throbbing cock pressing against his pants.

“Then why waste such a pleasant afternoon? If you’ve heard who I am, I’m sure you’ve heard what I am. And I am mateless now. It’s been lonely for me on the *Far Wanderer*, and the more so here, among supremis.”

“I’ve never seen anyone like you. I never knew anyone like you existed.”

“Then know my body, as I would know yours.”

“Oh, Skietra,” he moaned, in an agony of desire.

“Take your clothes off,” she invited him.

Tol’or stripped as fast as he could, and stood facing her, fully aroused.

“Lie down,” she said as she approached him, overwhelming his senses with the rich brown flesh of her body, the incredible breasts with nipples now fully erect, the curly black hair that waved around her head and the smaller tuft — something unknown among Velorian women — between her legs.

And then she was on him, a look of longing on her face as she impaled herself. She smiled then, seeing how his own face looked as his cock disappeared into her inch by inch, as she then used the full force of her vaginal muscles to clamp down hard on it.

“Let’s see which of us can move first,” she teased.

He tried to thrust, but couldn’t: It wasn’t for lack of lubrication; he could see the juices of love oozing from her pussy, dripping onto his belly, assailing his nostrils with their spicy aroma.

It was torture, but such *sweet* torture, knowing that she was trying to crush him with all her might but couldn't, just as he was trying to fuck her with all his might but couldn't. Like an irresistible force meeting an immovable object, his invulnerable cock meeting her invulnerable cunt.

The tension was unbearable — and heavenly.

Zanele ground against him, then leaned forward.

“Suck. Bite.”

Tol'or assailed her breasts: first left, then right. Like Velorian breasts, they were invulnerable to any known weapon, yet they yielded to his lips and tongue and teeth. He sucked with all his might, pulling the wondrous flesh into his mouth, swirling his tongue around her nipples, then biting them with all the power at his command.

He was rewarded with screams of ecstasy, and as the orgasmic waves spread from her nipples to her pussy, her entire body shuddered with release. As her vaginal muscles quivered, his cock exploded inside her — and exploded and exploded, sending wave after wave of pleasure through his body, lighting up his entire being.

Zanele roused herself, and then raised herself, sitting on Tol'or's face and inviting him to drink his fill from her fountain of love. Her juices had a delightful spicy taste and aroma, which he later learned was a combination of what she called cinnamon and cloves.

And when he sucked and bit her clit...

Next round, it was his turn to take top position, pounding her into the ground with wild abandon. She tightened her grip again, and as their pace grew more intense despite the friction, his cock became red hot, and her love juices burst into steam as she bucked and moaned and counterthrust.

The very ground shook beneath them as they came and came, and their screams carried for miles. Nobody came to disturb them. Velorians understood these things, and were delighted to hear the sounds of passion. It was Zanele herself who disturbed Tol'or... afterwards, in a different manner.

"Don't make any more of this than what it was," she said calmly.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. "Did I—"

"Nothing wrong of your doing. But I need to think clearly, you see. I had to get this out of my system... for now. Can you imagine what it's like to be cooped up on a spaceship for more than a year? With no men of your own kind, with no outlet for your needs?"

"Wasn't there....?"

"Tassos? Totally off limits. And totally loyal to Ju'lette. Perhaps he was tempted, but... I wasn't comfortable with them, knowing the situation. The only friend I had was Mbali, and we soon ran out of things to do and things to say."

"But you've seen other worlds."

"Only mine and this one. And mine is a painful memory. I can never go back, not unless your people come to liberate us... no, I can't talk about that."

Tol'or nodded, and changed the subject. "Sometimes I wish I could travel. Like the Companions."

“Where would you go?”

“I don’t know. They don’t tell us much. The most we hear is from the Lottery Boys. The Companions exchange messages with the High Council, but we never see them. And we never see the Companions again.”

“Until now.”

“Yes, until now.”

“You might not want to go, if you knew what they know. And you’d be very lonely. Like me. There’d be none of your kind there but the Companions, and they have... obligations, as I’m sure you can appreciate.”

“Indeed. But where will you go, when you’re finished here?”

“I don’t know. Where *could* I go?”

“Perhaps they’d accept you as a Companion.”

Zanele laughed, but with a touch of bitterness. “If we don’t see each other again, it’s been a pleasure. And you really have helped me. I need to be in a serious mood, to address serious matters.”

Only the next day, she was in an amorous mood again. And the day after that. She no longer made light of their relationship. And she began talking about her homeworld, a world so unlike Velor that Tol’or could barely understand it.

There was nothing of Old Earth on Velor but the Velorians; none of the flora or fauna shared any ancestral DNA with them. Yet the Galen and the Seeders had brought Terran ecology as well as Terrans themselves to Tanzrobi and who knew how many other worlds. Why was this, he wondered.

Their last time together, Zanele broke down and cried. She had already told the story of the fall of Tanzrobi and her revenge. But she had told it coldly and proudly. Only now did she let the pain and sorrow show. He took her in his arms then, and they made love slowly and tenderly.

On the fourth day, the insystem shuttle arrived to take her and Ju'lette to Velor.

12. Family Disunion

Ju'lette approached her family's home with mixed feelings. She was both anxious to see them and worried about how they'd receive her. When they had parted eleven years ago she had thought that she'd never see them again.

She'd left Velor with the intention of having a glorious career as a Companion. And now she was returning — the first Companion to do so. What would they think of her? Would they consider her a failure or would they think her heroic for her defense of Nova Iberia against the Aureans?

And already she was missing Tassos. Despite her pleading and her assurance that he could manage very well in Velor's high gravity and harsh environment, the High Council would not relent and allow him to leave Erin'lah.

And they had warned her not to tell anyone outside her family about the changes she had wrought in him — and to swear them to secrecy before the telling. And under no circumstance should she tell anyone how she had done it. They told her that breaking these injunctions would be a grave offense and the punishment would not be light.

As soon as the door opened her fears were laid to rest. She was surprised at the warmth of her parents' greeting. They embraced her and murmured her name and told her how glad they were to see her.

When she finally entered the living room, she found a handsome young man standing there.

"Hi, Ju'lette," he said. "Good to see you again."

She gave him a quizzical look. "Do I know you?"

He laughed. "Of course you do, you idiot."

She looked at him again. Could this cute guy really be her squirt of a brother? He'd been a gangly eleven when she'd left.

"Jor'lun? Is that you?"

"Sure is, Sis."

"Boy, have you changed. I remember thinking that whoever was operating the Maternity Engine when you were churned out must have been thinking about that night's orgy and got your genes all scrambled. Guess I was wrong. How about a proper greeting?"

He went over to her and embraced her.

She whispered in his ear: "If you weren't my brother, I'd show you just how good looking you've become."

She felt him hardening against her. He whispered back to her: "And if you weren't my sister..."

Their parents beamed at them, glad to see their children greeting each other as adults, complimenting each other in true Velorian fashion. Since Velorian

siblings were not as genetically close as natural siblings and pregnancy was controlled, there was no strict incest taboo. But it was highly discouraged — some needs were best satisfied outside the family dynamic.

When they went into the living room, Ju'lette was happy to see that not much had changed. She was surprised to see a large picture of herself at her Companions Academy graduation.

Her mother brought in a tray of Velorian delicacies. Ju'lette's eyes lit up. "I thought I'd never have a chance to eat these again. Thanks, Mom."

They talked quietly for a while about people she had known and events on Velor since she had left. Finally, Ju'lette said: "It feels strange being home. I thought about home often on Nova Iberia, but I wasn't supposed to ever come home."

"Well, you are home now," her mother said. "And we're happy to see you."

"I had such high hopes when I left. I wanted to be of service on the planet where I was indentured. And it turned out so badly."

"But we were told how heroic you and Liz'bet were," her father said. "And we're proud of you."

"Thank you, Dad. I met Kalla on Andros. I wanted so much to be like her. She's done so much for Andros."

"Is she still so beautiful?" Jor'lun asked.

Ju'lette laughed. "Yes, she's still gorgeous. And she honored me by befriending me."

“But what happened to you on Nova Iberia?” her mother asked. “They didn’t tell us very much.”

Ju’lette told them the bare facts about her mistreatment by Don Alfonso. She didn’t want to go into detail, didn’t really want them to know how she had suffered. But she could tell by the looks on her parents’ faces that they saw through her brave façade.

Her mother came over and embraced her. “It’s over now. You’re home. That part of your life is over. We’ll find you a good Velorian husband and you can have a family.”

Ju’lette hesitated, not knowing how to tell her parents what she needed to tell them. “I’m sure you remember the Lottery Boys. I don’t think I told you that mine was from Andros.”

Her parents seemed surprised by this change of subject. “Andros,” her father said. “You just mentioned meeting Kalla on Andros.”

“Yes. His name is Tassos and I met him again on Andros.”

“I’m sure he was glad to see you,” her mother said.

“It was more than that,” Ju’lette said.

“Well, of course,” her father said. “Word has come back that there are no women as beautiful and sexually exciting as those on Velor. I’m sure he had a wonderful time reliving his Lottery Boy days with you.”

“Of course, dear,” her mother said. “It must have been a nice reunion — reminding you of better days. But you’re home now. Best to forget about what’s happened since you left. Best to start your life on Velor as soon as possible. I

even have a husband in mind for you. One of your father's business associates has a son looking for a wife."

Ju'lette got up and started to pace. "Mom, Dad... I'm trying to tell you something and not doing a very good job. Tassos and I fell in love. He left Andros and came with me."

Now her father got up. "What are you talking about?" he shouted. "You're in love with a frail? Don't be ridiculous. How can you be in love with a puny little frail? And what do you mean he came with you ... where is he? No frail can survive on Velor."

"He's on Erin'lah. And he's not so puny any more. He can come down to Velor if given permission."

"How's that possible? The gravity alone would kill a frail."

"The High Council has forbidden me to tell you how I did it. In fact, I'm not allowed to tell anyone else that he's no longer frail, and you must not tell anyone."

"What do you mean he's no longer frail?" her father asked.

"He can do anything a Velorian can do — outside of a gold field. Except fly, of course."

Ju'lette could see the looks of disbelief on the faces of her parents and brother. "You may not believe it, but if you came to Erin'lah we could prove it."

"Even if that's true — and we have to take your word for that — what does that have to do with your life on Velor?" her mother said.

“Don’t you understand? I changed him because we love each other — because we want to be together.”

“All right. You’ve been together on your journey here,” her father said. “Now it’s time for him to go home and do his duty on Andros while you do yours on Velor.”

“You still don’t understand. He can’t have any real life on Andros anymore. He’s the same as a Velorian man — who you know can’t have sex with a frail woman.”

“You should have thought of that before you did — whatever it is you did to him,” her father countered.

“We did think of it. I only did it because we both wanted to be together — always.”

“Don’t you want children?” her mother asked.

“Yes. But I want Tassos’ children.”

“Children of a frail? Naturally born children?” her father shouted. “Disgusting. I forbid it. You’re on Velor now and you’ll do as I say.”

“No,” Ju’lette said, in a firm but quiet voice.

“No? What do you mean no?”

“I mean I won’t do as you say.”

“How dare you defy me!”

“I dare because when I left Nova Iberia I made a vow to myself. I vowed that I’d decide how to spend my life.”

“But what of your duty to Velor?” her mother asked.

“I did my duty to Velor when I was indentured — for life — to a stranger. And I kept to my part of the bargain despite how miserable it made me. Now it’s time for me to decide where my duty lies. I voluntarily made a vow to stay with Tassos — and I will honor that vow.”

Her parents sat there, stunned. She saw anger on her father’s face, and sadness on her mother’s.

“I thought you were back in our lives,” her mother said. “Now I see that we’ll be losing you again.”

“I’m sorry Mother — it can’t be helped.”

Ju’lette felt her mother’s eyes boring into her. Was it just sadness that Ju’lette wasn’t staying on Velor? It couldn’t be just that. After all, she knew Ju’lette wasn’t supposed to ever return. Was she wondering what it would be like to spend your life with someone you loved? *Could she actually be envying me?*

After a few moments, Ju’lette said: “There is one duty I want to perform for Velor, but I’ll need your help, Father”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve learned that the Aureans are an even bigger threat than we thought. I want to present my evidence to the High Council. They must be told how dire the situation is. An eyewitness to that threat has come with me.”

She told him about Zanele. There’d been a news blackout on the Azizi’s arrival as well as her own, and she’d been sequestered at a Vest’athy hostel usually frequented by visitors from Excelsor and outlying estates. There had been no official word on when or if she would be received by the High Council.

“What do you need me for?” he asked.

“I sent a request for an audience to the High Council. They’ve ignored me. Said I was just a Companion and they didn’t need any advice from me. I’ve heard that you have some influence with the government. Please, convince them that I have important information. Zanele, too — get them to give us a hearing.”

“I’ll do what I can. For Velor’s sake. Just in case you do have important information. And then I wash my hands of you.”

“Thank you, Father.”

13. Long Distance

She’d yearned so much to speak to Tassos that when she was finally able to get access to a com, she’d forgotten about the time delay between Velor and Erin’lah.

She’d thought of calling on her family’s com, but under the circumstances that didn’t seem prudent: if they didn’t even want to hear about her lover, they surely didn’t want to hear his voice or see his face.

From Trade Captain Dowjem, she had the address and number of the Factorial Interest Office in Vest’athy. She’d need their assistance anyway in finding a place to stay. Her family hadn’t objected to her calling ahead, but she avoided any reference to her other business there.

The FIO was located on a side street, and so unobtrusive that it didn’t even announce itself with a sign. The staff, all M-class administrative types, dressed

just as unobtrusively, and the desks and walls were bare of anything that could identify their employer. They could have been just anybody. That was the idea.

There were a dozen Velorians, men and women alike, most working at their computers. Dowjem had said they spent most of their time downloading trade contract proposals from incoming ships, tweaking them a bit into diplomatic language, then forwarding them to the High Council or the Senate as the case might be. There'd be counterproposals, of course, and the FIO people would try to incorporate those while still ending up with something acceptable to the trade captains back on Erin'lah – and to the local Factor General, Opara.

It was hard work, and had to be done fast, because the Scalantrans didn't like to stay in port any longer than they had to. The FIO people got little or no thanks from the High Council or the Senate, and other Velorians tended to look down on them, feeling that it was demeaning to work for an alien race. But the powers-that-be would have felt it even more demeaning to deal directly with the aliens except on the most serious issues. And since the Scalantrans couldn't set foot on Velor and the powers-that-be considered it beneath their dignity to travel to Erin'lah...

Ju'lette knew all this when she walked in the door, and hadn't expected a particularly friendly reception. But Spar'tak, the Chief Factorial she had spoken with — it had been him — jumped right up to greet her, with a smile that had nothing of hypocrisy or guile.

“Ju'lette Raul'lan,” he said warmly. “Spar'tak Tsor-el at your service.”

“You have a good memory for faces,” she responded, aware without making a point of it that Velorian men considered all Velorian women beautiful — all the more so if they were of a higher class.

“Not *that* good,” Spar’tak allowed. “Especially when the first impression is only from a com screen. But who else would be coming here?”

Of course, she thought, feeling suddenly embarrassed. “I need someplace to stay,” she said.

“I thought you’d be staying with your parents.”

“Well, I’m not. Can I stay at the Hostel?”

“Let me check.” He went over to the computer. A moment later he said: “You’re in luck. There’s a room available on the same floor as your friend Zanele.”

“Thank you. Now, could you arrange for me to speak to Tassos on Erin’lah.”

“Of course. I’ll arrange for him to take the call at the Factor General’s office.”

Ju’lette sat down and waited impatiently. At last, Spar’tak came back and directed her to the privacy booth in the back of the office. “Tassos is waiting at the Factor General’s office, in the privacy booth there.”

Once again, Ju’lette thanked Spar’tak.

“Tassos.” That was all she could say when she saw his face on the screen. He had to have seen the expression on her face. And yet his didn’t change. And then she realized.

“Ju’lette,” his voice said four seconds later. Now she could see the concern on his face. “You look upset. Didn’t your visit to your folks go well?”

“It started off really well. It was great seeing my baby brother all grown up. But then they started talking about finding me a husband, so I had to tell them about you.”

Four seconds later she heard his reply. “Is that when all hell broke loose?”

“Yeah. Now we have something in common. Being disowned by our families.”

Another four seconds — the wait seemed interminable. “I’m sorry Ju’lette. Sorry that I caused you this pain.”

“You gave up your family for me. Did you think I’d do less for you?”

“I never doubted you Ju’lette. It just hurts me to see the pain in your face. Especially since we can’t be together now.”

“It’s not as bad for me as it was for you. After all, I never expected to see them again. And besides ... even if I didn’t have you, I think I would’ve fought against having them find me a husband. After my experience on Nova Iberia I vowed I’d control my own life. Having you just made it easier for me to stand up to them.”

“So they cut you off completely?”

“My father promised to help arrange for the hearing before the High Council. After that, he’ll have nothing to do with me. I had a feeling Mom wanted to see me again, but Dad would make her life miserable if she said anything.”

“Damn! I wish they’d let me go down to Velor and stand by you. I’m as capable of it as Zanele.”

“They’re afraid of people finding out about your enhancement. I had to swear my parents to secrecy and couldn’t tell them how I did it.”

“I miss you, Ju’lette. And I love you. I hope you and Zanele can convince the High Council.”

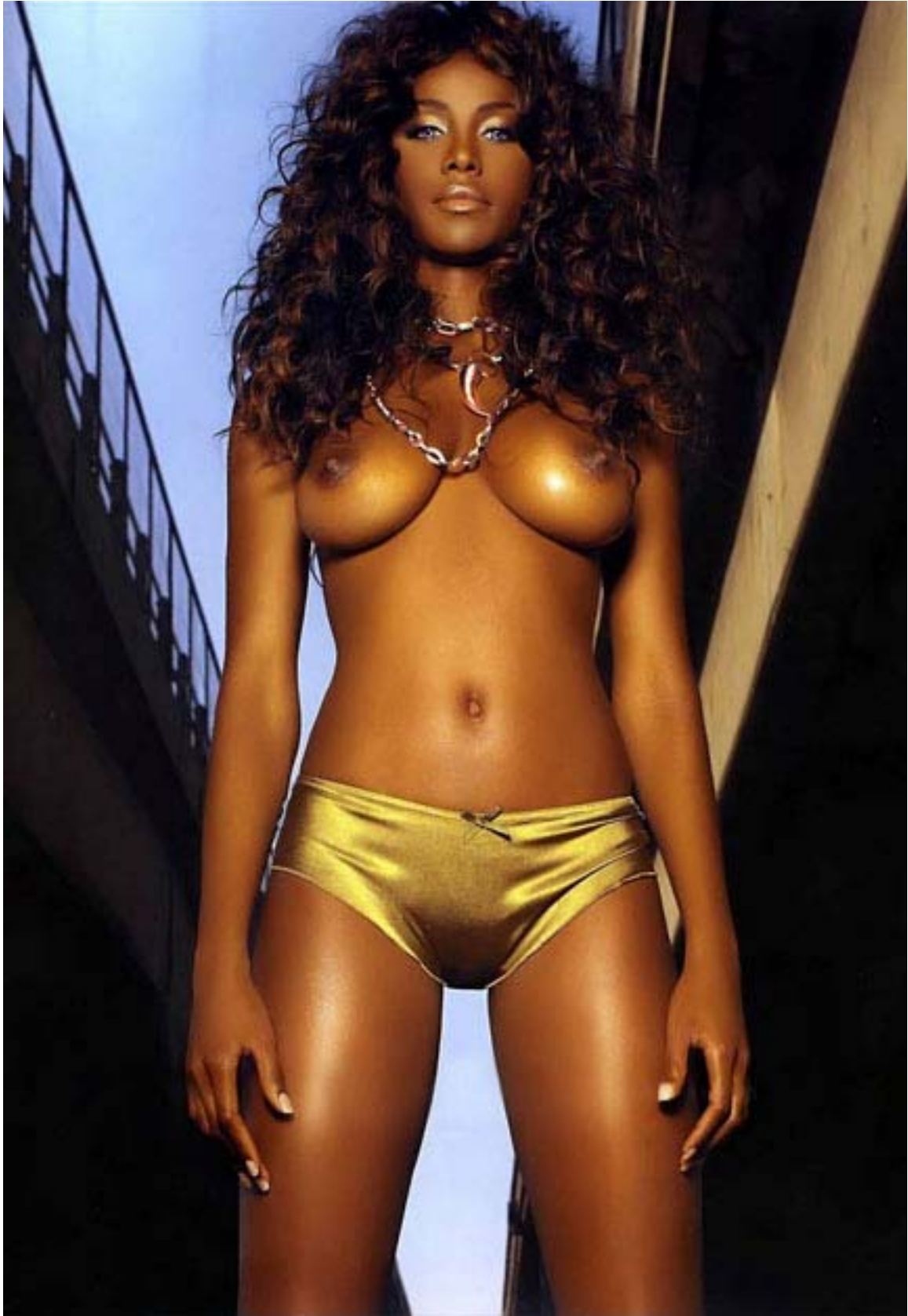
“I love you, Tassos. I can’t wait to see you again.”

14. Stranger in Town

As Zanele strode to the public hostel, she ignored the glances of passersby. She was wearing gold shorts, a concession to official restrictions on public nudity in Vest’athy, although she still insisted on going topless.

None knew of her immunity to gold; she wasn’t supposed to talk about that. She wasn’t supposed to talk about anything to anyone, except the High Council.

Ju’lette, at least, had family on Velor. Zanele didn’t even have the company of Mbali and Kobe. There were only Velorians at the hostel, strangers to her and mostly to each other, who regarded her as a curiosity, and even a freak.



Her exotic beauty had attracted notice from Velorian males on the street, and it soon attracted more than notice from one lust-struck youth from Excelsor. It was painful to see how much he wanted her, so painful that she went against the order of the High Council to explain why it could never be.

The man didn't believe her, and persisted in his attentions, until she took him to her room and, swearing him to secrecy, invited him to have his way with her — *try* to have his way with her.

It was as agonizing for Zanele as for her would-be lover.

She sensed that Nar'ses was a decent man, and that was the hardest part. She was willing. Yet, fully empowered as she was, she was impenetrable to a Velorian living in a gold field. Zanele finally took mercy on him, granting him oral relief — very carefully.

He left for home the next day. Probably just as well.

Zanele thought about Tol'or, about the time she had spent with him on Erin'lah. At first, it was just physical release. It had been so long since she'd had a man. But then, between satisfying their lust, they'd learned about each other. Zanele had been surprised at how interested Tol'or was in Tanzrobi and its culture.

"I teach the girls the erotic arts," he'd explained. "But they're learning about other cultures. I've always envied them their knowledge. But the stories you've told me — about your world — are making up for that."

And she'd found him satisfying her more than just physically. She'd felt a sense of well-being in his company. Did he feel the same way about her?

Perhaps she was ready to form a bond with a man again. Perhaps Tol'or was that man.

That evening, Ju'lette arrived, having been thrown out by her family.

"I should have expected it," she said, "After the way Tassos' family treated him. Only somehow, I expected my people to be rather more... enlightened."

"And what about...?"

"Oh, they'll help get us a hearing. Very noble of them. I'm sure they think it's a great sacrifice."

"We're not here to appeal to their nobility," Zanele said. "We're here to appeal to their self-interest. 'As Tanzrobi goes, so goes Velor.'"

"You think cynicism will get us anywhere?"

"Idealism will get us nowhere. I'm sure of that."

15. In High Council

As promised, the High Council had agreed to hear Ju'lette out, and even to allow Zanele to address the session.

It didn't go well. The councilors sat stony-faced as the Companion and the Azizi warrior presented their own testimony, the recorded statements of the *Far Wanderer's* officers, who stood ready to be queried by com; affidavits of other Scalantrans.

The meeting chamber was austere: gray walls all around, gray floor, gray ceiling. The High Councilors sat behind a table that was also gray, as were their chairs. Perhaps even their thoughts were gray.

Some of the councilors entered notes in their PersComps, or whispered to each other betimes. They seemed attentive yet expressionless, as if they were *shamat* players considering their next move but trying as hard as possible not to give away their intentions.

“Contrary to your unjustified assumption, we have not been idle in this matter,” intoned Senior High Councilor Koro’lat. “As soon as word reached here of the incident at Gebron, we ordered an Exploratory Investigation. Companions were advised by message crystal to report any Aurean activity involving new weapons. Had you remained at your posting on Nova Iberia, you would be aware of this.”

“I was already aware of it through the Scalantrans,” Ju’lette replied, ignoring the implied insult. “But nothing in your message provides any warning that the Companions might be in any personal danger from a new weapon. Withholding that information puts them at risk.”

“We withheld nothing,” Koro’lat retorted. “Gebron was only a small mining colony, too impoverished for anyone there to afford a Companion. The Aureans could easily have obliterated it with conventional arms, and the accounts the few survivors gave the Scalantrans were too vague to be credible.”

“The Scalantrans considered them credible. They are familiar with the Vendorian Star’Laz, and believe that the GAR is based on a stolen version of

that. They offered a reward to the first ship to obtain a working GAR, judging that it would be profitable to market their own version to worlds threatened by the Empire. But they are also afraid of what might happen if their ships are attacked with such weapons, and the Scalantrans don't scare easily."

"Let the Scalantrans look after themselves," Koro'lat said.

"Considering how heavily we rely on them, that is hardly wise. You have read, of course, the encyclical from Kalla. She has experience with the Aureans, having led the defense of Andros against them as you well know. She is first among Companions; you would do well to heed her words, even if you do not heed mine."

"Perhaps Kalla has grown too attached to Andros, and mistakes its interests for our own."

And so it went, becoming more and more frustrating.

"There is a pattern, honored councilors," Ju'lette summed up at last. "First Gebron. That was just a test. Then came Tanzrobi, the first field trial. The Empire has conquered worlds before, worlds it considered easy prey. It has attempted to do the same with others like Andros and Nova Iberia — and been thwarted only by the Companions.

"Do you not see the pattern? The Empire has learned that we alone stand in the path of its ambitions. That is the only reason for it to have developed the GAR. The Aureans already had weapons enough against ordinary humans, or the Scalantrans — against such, the GAR causes collateral damage beyond its

worth. To the best of my knowledge, it can be wielded only by supremis. Do you not see the pattern?"

"We do not see this weapon," Koro'lat interrupted.

"I have seen it," Zanele declared. "Perhaps you should pray you never do."

Koro'lat glowered at her.

"You are here before us only on our sufferance," Koro'lat warned her. "You have no standing on Velor."

"Honored Sir, I hope that the fact I can stand here at all, in your gravity, will give you pause. I remind you that I am of the *masaba*, the highest genetic sept on my planet. In strength and invulnerability, I am a match for any Companion or any Prime; and more than a match, I dare say, for any of you. And yet I am now afraid — afraid for my own people, afraid for yours."

"Your people are no concern of ours," Koro'lat retorted. "And any fears you have for Velor are entirely misplaced."

"I find *Kibi Oweaba* entirely credible," Ju'lette insisted, feeling the insult almost as deeply as Zanele. "Likewise her compatriots Mbali Ndlovu and Kobe Odinga, whose recorded testimonies you have seen, although they could not be here in person."

"A primitive chieftain on a primitive world, and a simple blacksmith," Koro'lat said.

Ju'lette glanced at Zanele, seeing the fury in her face. Was this man twice a fool, to so insult two of the Tanzrobians in the presence of a third he must know to be far stronger than him?

Zanele caught her glance, and Ju'lette returned a look of sympathy but also caution, as she countered Koro'lat.

"Although they too cannot be here in person, you have seen the reports and testimonies of the Scalantrans. Velor has dealt with their people for hundreds of years. Never have they been dishonest towards us in word or deed.

"Those of the *Spirit of Youth* would never have lived to bring word of the fate of Tanzrobi but for the courage and resourcefulness of Zanele, who stands before you today, and that of Mbali – and indeed that of Kobe. Doubt them, and you doubt the Scalantrans. That is not wise."

"That may all be very well," Koro'lat said. "But you bring no physical proof. And even if we credit both of you, what are we to do in the absence of any technical data?"

"You might do well to consult the Vendorians. They build Vendorian steel ships for the Scalantrans. Perhaps they can build them for us — that would give us at least one advantage denied to the Aureans. And they are said to have knowledge of weapons as well."

"Velor is hardly in need of ships. Or of weapons."

"And how long will that remain true? Our world is now defenseless. We are defenseless. From the very foundation of Velor, we have never had to worry about any external threats. But we'd *better worry now*."

"You put us in very difficult position," Koro'lat said.

"With all due respect, you are putting the Companions, and Velor itself, in an extremely difficult position," Ju'lette said. "What does the High Council propose to do to meet this threat?"

"We have already intensified combat training, as you know."

"That will not suffice."

"And what alternatives can you offer?"

"I have mentioned the Vendorians."

"Do you have any idea what warships cost? Assuming for the moment that we could make use of them, in what manner do you expect us to pay?"

"Perhaps the Senate would have some ideas."

"We have not granted you permission to consult the Senate."

"I don't need any. I am a citizen of Velor."

"A citizen under obligation to the Academy and to this Council."

"An obligation abrogated under terms of your own general directive."

"You may think so, but you are still under our authority until the end of your term. We do not look favorably upon your scandalous behavior on Andros —"

"I did not come here to discuss that."

"— and we will not look favorably on you trying to involve the Senate in this matter until we have had time to thoroughly deliberate on it."

And so it went, until Koro'lat dismissed the session.

16. Waiting Game

“You see how it is,” Koro’lat told his fellow councilors in private a few days later. “We must do everything we can to keep this under control. We need *time* to deal with this situation, and she doesn’t want to give us any.”

“And what do you propose?” Junior Councilor Dar’nyot asked.

“We can only hope that one of these alleged weapons comes into our hands. Only then can we analyze it and perhaps devise an adequate defense. We may, however, have to deal with the Scalantrans, who will naturally act to their own advantage.”

“Credits.”

“Indeed, and how are we to get them? We must recruit more Companions. There are any number of worlds without them, yet with men of sufficient means to afford them. I dare say that on the more prosperous planets like Andros and Tazzi, there might be a market for dozens.”

“It will take time to recruit and train them.”

“Exactly. But we can’t afford any unfavorable publicity. That would defeat the entire purpose. We have things under control on Erin’lah, and we’d better keep them under control here. We can’t afford to have the Senate involved — those people don’t know anything about offworld affairs, and they don’t know anything about keeping their mouths shut, either.”

“So what do we do about Ju’lette and these Tanzrobians?”

“Stall. Tell them we’re already consulting with the Senate. That we are drafting a proposal to submit to the Scalantrans for joint research on weapons.”

“Will that suffice?”

“It had better. Perhaps Ju’lette’s paramour will distract her.”

“A disgraceful liaison!”

“And that black woman seduced one of our instructors on Erin’lah.”

“Another disgraceful liaison.”

“But we may get some benefit from it, you see. I shall have to have a word with Jes’kor.”

“Indeed.”

There was nothing more to say about Koro’lat’s Brava nephew, who had certainly never been much use here before he was shipped out to Erin’lah. The Maternity Engine must have made a mistake, Koro’lat had complained for years. Dar’nyot quickly changed the subject.

“In the meantime, I presume that we should continue to send the same advisory as before to Companions via outgoing ships. There are still some routes and therefore planets that have not yet been covered.”

“The ‘Exploratory Investigation’ advisory. You’ve seen to it before; see to it now. But the advisory and nothing but the advisory, understood.”

“It *shall* be done,” Dar’nyot promised.

“It’s all a matter of proper channels and proper procedures,” the man named Way’t had told her. He was Koro’lat’s spokesman, and the only person Ju’lette had been able to reach at the High Council offices for several days.

She was still staying at the hostel with Zanele, hoping for some further word from the High Council. But time was running out. The *Far Wanderer* couldn’t wait

much longer, she reckoned, and the next scheduled ship was due in a moon. And they still didn't have any idea what to do or where to go if the Council failed them.

It was hard to say which was worse — the boredom or the anxiety. It must have been both that drove her now to approach the Senate in person. There had been no response to any of her messages, and the governing body for Velor's internal affairs was near the end of session for the year.

In theory, any Velorian citizen could appeal to the Senate.

In practice...

She made it as far as the Outer Office. A clerk there claimed that he couldn't find any record of her inquiries. When she tried to explain her business, she was politely but firmly rebuffed.

"This is a matter for the High Council," he insisted. "We lack any authority over off-world affairs, as you well know, nor have we received any advisories from the Council on this matter."

Ju'lette should have seen it coming. It was defeat. Her long journey home was futile. She had failed everyone who had put their trust in her — Nova Iberia, Kalla, the Tanzrobians, most of all the Scalantrans... There was no way out, or round, or through.

Her next stop was the Factorial Interest Office, for another private call to Tassos. The last call she would make from Velor.

Tassos knew things hadn't gone well as soon as he saw the dejected look on Ju'lette's face.

"I've failed, Tassos," she said. "I'm a complete, utter failure."

"Tell me what happened." The damned four-second delay seemed like an eternity.

"It was all for nothing. All this time ... the years it took to get here to warn them and it was all for nothing."

"Didn't they even let you talk to them?"

"Oh, Zanele and I talked to the High Council. We told them all we knew. We told them of the danger, what a terrible threat the Aureans are. Zanele told them about the GAR. If only she'd kept it. Maybe if she'd shown it to them it would've made a difference."

"You couldn't convince them?"

"No. What are we? A Companion with no standing at home and a woman of an unknown race from an unknown planet. Less than nothing to them."

"What about the Senate?"

"I couldn't even get in to see them. I was useless, Tassos. Just useless."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Ju'lette. You tried. I know how hard you tried. You may have failed, but you're not a failure. I doubt if anyone could have done better. Their minds are closed."

"I'm so afraid of what's going to happen to Velor. We're so unprepared."

"Still... You gave them warning. Someday, in the future, they'll remember that. They'll remember that you were right."

“Small consolation. And I made the *Far Wanderer* go so far out of its way. Velor isn’t even on its trade route. It lost so much time.”

“Now Ju’lette, you know that Scalantrans don’t give charity. They only did for you what they felt they owed you. If it wasn’t for you the whole original crew of the *Far Wanderer* would’ve perished.”

“I was only helping Liz’bet. Are they still at Erin’lah?”

“No. They *had* to leave. You can understand that. But before they left, Marpolom gave me an All-World Travel Pass for you and anyone in your company. We can go wherever we want.”

“Yes, Tassos. But where can we go?”

“I don’t know, Ju’lette. Come back here as soon as you can. We’ll figure it out. All of us. You and me and Zanele and Mbali and Kobe. We’ll figure it out.”

“I’ve missed you so, Tassos. Zanele and I will be back on the next shuttle.”

“Till then, Ju’lette, my love.”

“Till then, Tassos, my love.”

Zanele wasn’t surprised by the news when Ju’lette returned to the hostel, nor by her eagerness to catch the next shuttle.

“How can anyone *live* in a place like this?” she asked. “Nothing but glass and metal and....

“Plastic,” Ju’lette supplied. “But I was born in Vest’athy. I grew up here. It never seemed strange or ugly to me. And you haven’t seen the rest of Velor. It’s really very beautiful—“

“Mountains and deserts. That’s what the man from Excelsor told me.”

“I wish I could show you the Crimson Spires. Down by the ocean.”

“I wish I could show you... but I’ll never see Tanzrobi again. That’s what I’ve learned here.”

“And I don’t suppose I’ll ever see Velor again. But then, I’d never expected to see it again after I left the first time.”

17. Trouble on Erin’lah

Tol’or threw open the door to Zanele’s room and slammed it behind him. Before she even had a chance to greet him, he began shouting. “After all these years. After all my hard work. Living here. Away from Velor. No family of my own. How could they do this to me?”

“Who did what to you, Tol’or?” she asked.

“Jes’kor called me in to his office today. Started dressing me down without even a proper greeting. Told me my behavior has been disgusting. ‘An occasional fuck is one thing,’ he said. ‘We all like to taste exotic fruit. Wouldn’t mind trying her myself.’ I could barely hold myself back from punching him out then and there. How dare he talk about you that way?”

“Then he said: ‘But to have a relationship with that woman is going too far. A non-Velorian. Natural born. What kind of an example is that to set for our students?’ Then he demoted me. Gave me some meaningless administrative job. Said I wasn’t fit to teach anymore.”

“I don’t understand,” Zanele said. “Aren’t you teaching the Velorian girls to have sex with non-Velorian men?”

“Oh, that’s *different*,” Tol’or answered. “Velor *profits* from that. They’re doing it for the benefit of Velor. Damned hypocrites.”

“I’m sorry, Tol’or. Sorry I’ve caused you all this trouble. Maybe we should break it off. Maybe you’ll get your job back then.”

“I’ll be damned if I break it off. You’ve taken enough shit already, first on Velor and now here. I wouldn’t give that bastard the satisfaction. Even if...”

“Even if what?”

Tol’or grabbed her by the shoulders. “Even if you didn’t mean so much to me. I don’t think I realized before how much you *do* mean to me. When you came off the shuttle... the look on your face... after the way the High Council treated you and Ju’lette. It was as if my own heart was about to break.”

Zanele stroked his face. “When we first met, it was just to satisfy a deep sexual hunger and erase the memory of that hated Aurean. But I’ve grown to love you Tol’or. I’m just sorry to have caused you pain.”

“You’ve caused *nothing*. Except to make me fall in love with you. That’s one thing they can’t take away from us.”

Tol’or went over to the bed and drew Zanele down beside him. “Maybe it’s better this way. Everyone thought I had such a great job — teaching sexual techniques to Velorian girls. But I was teaching them to have sex safely with a frail. I always had to be in control of myself, always think about what they were doing and how a frail would react. And besides, a man likes to make his own

choice of a woman. And I think I've learned that it's better to have one real, passionate woman than a bunch of girls."

Tol'or began kissing her breasts, nibbling her nipples, until he heard her scream in delight. She pushed his hand between her legs. "See," she said. "I want you already."

Tol'or rolled off the bed, onto the floor, and pulled Zanele after him.

"Why'd you do that?" she asked.

"I don't want to hold back at all and I'm afraid we might break the bed."

Zanele laughed. "We don't want them to take the price of a bed out of your new salary."

He buried his head between her outstretched legs and licked the juices from her dripping cunt. "You taste delicious," he said. "You are exotic fruit."

"And you're the only man I want to taste me."

Then he sucked and bit her clit until she begged him to fuck her. He plunged into her with all his might. He moved furiously within her and she met his every movement with equal strength until he poured his passion into her convulsing body. "I love you, Zanele!" he shouted, not caring who might hear. "I need no other woman but you!"

They held each other tightly until she once more felt his cock hard against her body. She looked down at him and thought: *How wonderful it is to make love with this man. His skin so fair against mine. His passion so strong.*

Zanele wrapped her hand around his cock and began licking the long shaft. Then she took him into her mouth and sucked until he said: “Get on top of me, Zanele, I love when you do that.”

Now she impaled herself on his cock, taking him deep inside, loving the way he filled her. She began rocking slowly, then faster, enjoying the look of ecstasy on his face. Her orgasm built and then exploded and she cried out: “I love you, Tol’or.”

After a few moments she said: “We might come from different worlds, but I think we belong together.”

“Yes, Zanele. We belong together. No matter what anyone else thinks.”

Jes’kor couldn’t demote Ju’lette, but he could ban her from the Academy’s facilities on Erin’lah. Not that it made much difference; she and Tassos had been forbidden to have any meaningful contact with the staff or trainees from the start.

They were staying with the Factor General now, and so was Zanele, along with Kobe and Mbali. Thanks to its diplomatic status, Velorian authorities couldn’t bother them here. But it was an awkward arrangement, a nuisance to Opara and her mate group — especially when Tol’or snuck in for a conjugal visit.

Still, it was the perfect place for candid talk, free of any prying eyes or ears — Opara had encouraged this, knowing what the humans faced, knowing that they had to settle things among themselves before they approached her for further advice. She managed to set aside one of the offices for that purpose.

Mbali and Kobe were already in the room with Ju'lette and Tassos when Zanele and Tol'or came in. "I'm sorry, Tol'or," Ju'lette said. "This meeting is just for the five of us."

Zanele put her arm around Tol'or. "I want him to stay."

"Are you sure you want him to hear our plans?" Ju'lette asked. "Are you sure you trust him?"

Zanele nodded. "Yes. I trust him with my life."

"That's good enough for me," Tassos said.

"Good enough for me also," Ju'lette said. They didn't expect a response from Mbali or Kobe, knowing that would defer to an *asaba*. In any case, she was sure they wouldn't object.

"You all know by now that Zanele and I failed in our mission to warn the High Council or the Senate about the Aurean menace," she said. "And my family has disowned me, mainly because of my relationship with Tassos. So there's nothing left for me on Velor."

"And Kobe and Tassos and I have no place here," Mbali said.

"No one's said anything to me, but I know they have no use for me either," Zanele said.

"What's to become of us?" Kobe said.

"Here's the good news," Tassos said. "Just before the *Far Wanderer* left, Marpolom gave me what he called an All-Worlds Pass for Ju'lette. The Scalantrans will take Ju'lette anywhere she wants to go, and she can take anyone she wants with her."

"This question is," Zanele said, "where should we go?"

"Yes," Ju'lette said. "That's the difficulty. I have a list of the stops on the *Galactic Roamer's* trade route, but it's not as if any of these planets is particularly attractive to us."

"Do you know if they have Companions?" Tassos asked.

"All except Ostrog. I'm not sure about planets on connecting routes, but any well established world, not too far from Velor, would have one. And I don't think it would be a good idea for me or Zanele to be on a planet with a Companion," Ju'lette said.

"You're right," Zanele said. "That wouldn't be a good idea. They might harbor enmity towards us out of loyalty to Velor, once word gets around. And word will get around through the message crystals... But that's not a problem for Mbali and Kobe." She turned to the two of them. "Where would you like to go?"

Mbali thought a minute. "I know we can't find a world just like Tanzrobi. But we wouldn't fit into any world that's really developed technically. Someplace that Kobe could use his skills as a blacksmith."

She paused for a moment, then asked: "May I speak frankly?"

"Of course," said Zanele. "This is no time or place to stand on custom."

"There are other worlds like Alecan where some of our people emigrated, mostly of the lower septs," Mbali said. "They would surely welcome us. Perhaps even come to our aid against the Aureans."

"Are they bound by indenture, like the Companions?" Ju'lette asked.

“Only by contract, for set terms,” Mbali said. “At least, that is what we were always told.”

“It may not matter,” Ju’lette said. “If you mean to fight, you’ll need weapons, weapons to counter the GAR, weapons that only the Vendorians can provide. The Scalantrans can afford them; some are arming their ships. But others....”

“But we can try ... we can at least try to convince them to help us,” Mbali said.

Ju’lette saw everyone looking at her. *How did I become a leader?* she thought. *I can’t make a decision for all of us.*

After a moment, she said: “We simply don’t *know* enough yet. I think the five of us will just have to look until we find appropriate worlds.”

“Ju’lette,” Tol’or said. “Please make that six. Please take me with you.”

“You truly want to go with us? To leave your world forever?”

“If you haven’t all heard,” Tol’or said, “I’ve been demoted — forbidden to have contact with the Academy students.”

“Why?” Tassos asked.

“Because of my relationship with Zanele.”

“We can’t take you with us just because you’ve lost your position,” Ju’lette said.

“It’s more than that. Ever since I’ve sent Companions off to other planets, I’ve wanted to go places, to see the universe. And I love Zanele. I want to be with her — wherever that is.”

“Zanele?” Ju’lette asked.

“I love him and I want him with me,” she responded. “I knew he was going to ask — I’d have been sorely disappointed if he hadn’t!”

“Well, *I’m* certainly not going to disappoint you,” Ju’lette said with a smile. “I’m overjoyed for both of you. We can tell Opara that all six of us will be using that Travel Pass.”

“I don’t think the High Council and the Academy are going to be thrilled about this,” Tol’or said.

“They’re not going to stop us. Nothing is going to stop us now.”

That night, as they lay in each other’s arms, sated with love, Tassos said: “I’m really glad Tol’or is joining us — for Zanele’s sake.”

“It’ll really be good for us also.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember when we spoke about having children, I said someday, in the future.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“I wasn’t sure then.”

“I know Velorians don’t have children naturally and look down on the Aureans for doing that.”

“That’s not the problem. The problem is that I wouldn’t want our children to be like Alexius, all alone, having to be celibate.”

“A terrible thing for anyone to endure.”

“Especially a Velorian. But if Zanele and Tol’or have children ...”

“Yes. They could be mates for our children.”

“We must talk to them about it. And pledge to stay together.”

“It will be good, Ju’lette. Even better than the life we had hoped to have together.”

Two days later, Ju’lette stormed into the room she shared with Tassos, waving a printout in the air. “They can’t do this to me,” she shouted. “I won’t let them. Not after what I’ve been through.”

“Slow down, Ju’lette,” Tassos said. “Tell me what happened.”

“Opara gave me this message from the High Council. You won’t believe it. They claim that I owe ninety-two years on my contract. Ninety-two years!”

“Nice of them to credit you with your travel time,” Tassos said.

Ju’lette gave him a piercing look. “Not very funny, darling.”

“Sorry. Please go on.”

“They forbid me to leave on the *Galactic Roamer*. Say I’m to wait for the *Star Seeker* which will pick up the new Companions. They say I’m to go with them and my contract sold again.”

“Ju’lette! This is horrible.”

“You’re damn right it is. And I won’t do it. I refuse to be indentured again.”

“But they already got full payment for your contract.”

“They say letting me off sets a bad precedent. Maybe word will get around and who knows, an unhappy Companion could do away with her master, make it look like an accident and then think she’s free of her contract.”

“That’s ridiculous. I think they’re just punishing you for standing up to them.”

“I won’t let them do this to me. They’d have to use brute force to get me on that ship and they’d have to force me off of it at any planet where I’m to be sold.”

“The captain of the *Star Seeker* would honor your All-World Pass and not force you off the ship — even if he could. But we can’t let it come to that. We’d... never see each other again.”

Ju’lette stopped her pacing and slumped down in the chair. “I’m sorry Tassos, I’ve only been thinking of myself, how horrible it would be to be indentured again. But just being separated would break my heart. But what can we do?”

“Let’s calm down and think it out. Call in Tol’or and Zanele. Maybe they’ll have an idea. There must be a way for all of us to leave on the *Galactic Roamer*.

18. Up and Out

“Goodbye, Tassos,” Ju’lette said.

She had to make it look good, as they parted under the watchful eyes of the Examiners. They’d made it look good the day before, sneaking off to one of the sex shacks, supposedly oblivious to surveillance, shaking the shack down with their lovemaking, and moaning in seeming pain as well as pleasure.

The Examiners were not fooled. Yet the Examiners were fooled.

“A strange name for a police force,” Tassos had whispered to her when they entered the shack.

“In the old days, they graded only our performance, not our conduct,” Ju’lette had whispered back. “And there weren’t so many of them.”

Too many here, at the boarding area for the *Galactic Roamer*, to have gotten through them, even with the Scalantrans running interference.

Tol’or hadn’t come to the landing port, but had contrived to make himself overheard making a passionate and tearful farewell to Zanele – before she left to board the ship with Mbali and Kobe, before the arrival of the Lottery Boys, fresh from the final exams.

The Lottery Boys, who walked up the ramp like conquering heroes returned from battle, didn’t know what sort of company they’d have on their return journey, and at Opara’s advice Travel Captain Kordovom had agreed to keep them apart from the other passengers — quartering the latter at the opposite end of the ship in a storage area emptied of its cargo. The two groups would not be permitted elsewhere in the ship on the same shifts.

Ju’lette and Tassos spent enough time at their farewells to infuriate the Examiners — and put them off their guard.

“Enough of this,” their leader finally interrupted.

Tassos, with a great show of reluctance, released Ju’lette and headed for the ramp, never looking back.

“Look on the bright side,” the Examiner taunted her. “Where you’re going, you’ll get plenty of cock.”

Ju’lette had no idea where she’d be going if she took the *Star Seeker* with the new crop of Companions. Her indenture would be sold whenever and wherever it

would bring the best profit — the only difference was that hers would be for a shorter term.

Not that it would come to that, but she had to play the part.

Most of the new graduates had returned to Velor to say their farewells to, or perhaps just make peace with their families. Some sought the blessing of Skietra at her shrine, a custom that had fallen into disuse but was still honored by the more conservative Velorians. Ju'lette had never seen the point of it; what had Skietra ever done for her — or her world?

One of her classmates — it had been only nine years ago, but it seemed like a lifetime — had actually been inside the shrine, on the day that the Great Door was opened to pilgrims bringing prayers and petitions. It was also on that day that the Senate and the High Council deigned to honor Skietra, and to receive the blessings of the clerics and acolytes.

The dark stone structure was as stark within as without — what Hil'dee had seen of it. She hadn't been terribly impressed with the ceremony: "They just tell our fearless leaders what they want to hear, once a year, like clockwork. That's what Mom said. Then they take them upstairs for an orgy. I didn't see that. Mom must have taken me just to cure any awe I might have had of the place."

Where was Hil'dee now? What kind of a master did she serve? Ju'lette knew only that she must be her own master now.

"I've never done this before," Tol'or had protested when Ju'lette first outlined her plan to the Scalantrans.

“Just imagine jumping, only a lot higher than you can here,” she told him. “When the time comes, your volatai will do the rest. At least I hope they will. We can’t afford to be seen practicing. If worst comes to worst, I’ll try to carry you. But that could throw things off schedule.”

“We’ll wait as long as we can,” Kordovom had promised. “We do that to honor Marpolom and the *Far Wanderer*, even though we do not know you or fully understand your purpose.”

“We do not fully understand it ourselves,” Ju’lette had admitted. “We hope to gain greater understanding in the course of our journey. The worlds we visit may have much to teach us.”

When the *Galactic Roamer* pulled up its ramp, Ju’lette left the landing field looking forlorn. The Examiners dispersed, evidently thinking their mission accomplished, noting only that she was headed past the lake, apparently seeking solitude in the forest beyond.

They’d assume that Tol’or was back at his quarters, licking his emotional wounds. He was in fact heading by a roundabout route to the same forest, which was thick enough to conceal them and their movements as long nobody was scanning the area with tachyon vision.

The border of the uranium zone was only about two oras’ run distant — a Velorian’s run, that is, and even in a 50% gold field that was four times the pace of a Terran. Companions-in-training had long been allowed there to practice flying, but Tol’or and Ju’lette both knew that was over for the graduating class, and the other classes were on break.

Somebody may be looking for us, Ju'lette thought. Somebody surely will be. But not yet. Let it be not yet.

Behind them, she knew, the *Galactic Roamer* would be spending at least an ora on checkout procedures. Kordovom would stall a bit, but not enough to arouse suspicion. Then the huge ship — so huge that it would have collapsed under its own weight had it not been made from Vendorian steel — would rise slowly from the ground and head up and out, passing over the uranium zone.

As she and Tol'or passed into the zone, the effect wasn't immediate, nor had she expected it to be. The first sign was that their pace picked up; they slowed to a trot as they emerged from the forest into a savanna. The change had nothing to do with the uranium; it was only a climatic thing. They came to a halt in a small arroyo that offered cover if any were needed.

With their distance vision, they could see the *Galactic Roamer* rising above the horizon.

"It's now or never," she told Tol'or, who only nodded as he leaped into the air, and tumbled upwards out of control. He would later apologize to her for having studied and taught only erotic and martial arts rather than flight.

Without hesitation, Ju'lette grabbed hold of him. Calculating the trajectory in her head, she put herself on what she hoped was the right vector to intercept the Scalantran ship. But it was hard to make the proper allowance for the mass of Tol'or, who had become a drag. She had anticipated that this might happen, and tried to prepare for it. Still....

As the sky turned black around them, as Tol'or experienced space for the first time, she had feared he might become disoriented. Surprisingly, however, he seemed to be getting a grip on himself — as he explained afterwards, it was as if he could *imagine* himself flying in the airless void, with only the stars to guide him. Maybe it came from memories of the astronomy and cosmology he had studied in his youth, and which still fascinated him.

The *Galactic Roamer* loomed before them. Ju'lette took hold of Tol'or again and adjusted their course. The vessel grew before them, blotting out the stars: a vast gray bulk. Of a sudden, a bright light appeared amidships: the valve. Again Ju'lette adjusted their course, homing on the light.

Tassos and Zanele were waiting in the airlock to greet them, to embrace Ju'lette and Tol'or. They might have gone beyond embraces, but they knew that Kobe and Mbali would be waiting on the other side. They would celebrate together, all six of them, once the lock had cycled.

The *Galactic Roamer* was well on its way to the wormhole by the time Jes'kor and the Examiners figured out what had happened.

“You must recall the ship immediately,” Jes'kor told Opara. “Those people are traitors.”

“Those people are under the protection of Travel Captain Kordovom,” she told him. “I have no say in the matter.”

The Velorians didn't believe her, of course, and yet it was true. Travel captains were the ultimate arbiters on their ships, a matter of long tradition.

Opara didn't mention that she had been in on the escape plan, and had sought and obtained the approval of Kordovom. That wasn't a matter of tradition, but of friendship and sympathy.

"I can see to it that the *Galactic Roamer* never lands here again," Jes'kor thundered. He thought he meant it.

"You mean, cut off trade with the Scalantrans?" Opara responded. She really did mean it, but it took some time for Jes'kor to appreciate that. It didn't fully sink in until he'd had his Uncle Koro'lat call the Factor General on the com and make the same demand, with the same result.

Koro'lat blamed Jes'kor for everything that had gone wrong, and ordered him home on the next shuttle.

What can I do to get back in his good graces? he wondered. *What **can** I do?*

And then he thought of Pimponeous. He'd been kept in gold shackles in a spare room at the Academy barracks because nobody had any idea what to do with him. After days of whining and complaining, he had fallen silent. It occurred to Jes'kor that the Aurean prisoner might have some useful information.

"Ah, finally somebody with some *authority*," the prisoner intoned after Jes'kor introduced himself. "It will go well for you if it goes well for me."

Jes'kor wasn't about to recognize Pimponeous' authority, whatever that might be, but cut right to the quick: what did he know about the Scalantrans, and what did he know about the rogue Companion and their other strange passengers?

"Liars, cheats and thieves, the lot of them. You Velorians don't know what or whom you're dealing with. You never travel abroad as we do."

“Except for the Companions.”

“Except for the Companions. Whom you never see again.”

“Except this once.”

“Which should be a lesson to you. The Scalantrans are a corrupting influence, quite aside from the fact that they have been cheating you for generations in the Companion trade. You are clearly in need of an ed-ju-ca-tion, and in me you have an unprecedented ed-ju-ca-tion-al opportunity.”

“You’d have to be mad to stop there.’ That’s how it got its name.”

Tassos had been reading up on Madstop, their next stop: a world of fire and smoke that would never have been settled but for dawn’s eyes – priceless jewels produced in tectonic upheavals touched off by a recent (geologically speaking) asteroid impact.

“The volcanic tubes might be pleasurable to such as us,” Ju’lette mused. “But it might not be a good idea to seek them out. Kordovom tells me the indenture of the Companion there is held by a Syndicate that has put her to work helping with prospecting and mining. We wouldn’t want her to come across us.”

“I suppose not.... I wonder how the shareholders allocate her for her... other duties.”

“I don’t want to go there.”

“Indeed.”

Their quarters aboard the *Galactic Roamer* were bereft of any decoration or any sense of home: just four bare Vendorian steel walls. They’d get better once

the Lottery Boys were offloaded. Not that Tassos paid any attention to the walls when his mate lay stretched on the bed before him.

“It’s strange,” she said. “All those years I spent longing for home, and coming home, and when I got there it wasn’t home, after all.”

“And now we don’t even know where we’re going.”

“We’re going home. We don’t know where home is yet, but we’re going to find it. You and me and Tol’or and Zanele. Maybe even Kobe and Mbali.”

“Something devoutly to be wished.”

“Right now, I devoutly wish you to come to bed.”



Epilogue: A New Dawn Approaches

He was a guardian of important personages, here on the world called Olympia.

Not that there was much to guard against. There was little crime here, and war was unheard of; but because the natives had long life spans, they were fearful of accidents as well as the unlikely killer or robber or rapist.

It was pleasant work, mostly a process of immersion in daily life. Alexius had immersed himself in the lives of dozens of worlds during the course of his wanderings. He might be accounted an authority on cultures by now, had anyone been interested in that sort of expertise.

Some of the important personages he guarded were women. Because of his looks, some sought services beyond those he usually offered. And of these, some were very beautiful. Worse, some were more than that -- goodly, even noble.

He declined their invitations, as politely as possible. Some persisted, and he encouraged them to believe that he preferred the company of other men. A few persisted further, and on rare occasions he told the truth.

They would look on him then, sometimes in frustrated longing, sometimes in pity. That was the worst part.

No, that wasn't the worst part. He could never tell them the worst part.

Olympia was not the only First Generation world Alexius had visited. There had been Amun and Ishtar, to which the Galen themselves had brought ancient Egyptians and Babylonians millennia ago.

The Galen had futzed some of them. They were called Protos and, although they hadn't known it, they were mileposts on the road that eventually led to the Velorians.

Their powers varied, as did their ethnic backgrounds. Some of them were powerful indeed, far above the levels of Aurean Betans.

It was on Ishtar that he had met Zakiti, a dusky beauty who owned a great estate and entertained her lovers in what for Ishtar was a modest dwelling -- but would have been reckoned a palace anywhere else.

Zakiti had never entertained a Velorian, and Alexius had been at pains to explain that he was not a Velorian. It hadn't mattered to her, and she had been confident that her invulnerability was sufficient -- to ease his mind, she had ordered one of the household robots to attack her. She had stood there proudly as the robot smashed itself against her naked body.

She and Alexius had shared a night of incredible passion.

Zakiti had died of peritonitis a few days later.

The Scalantrans had gotten him off the planet. He had been celibate since, except for occasional liaisons with freed Companions on Second Generation worlds. But they had only reminded him of Kalla, and painfully further reminded him that they were *not* Kalla. And so he had moved on, working his way from one world to the next, until this one....

Olympia had been settled by an earlier Harvest of the Galen. The original abductees had been Greek -- not from the later Greece of the *Basileia ton Romaion* from which the founders of Andros had been drawn, but ancient Greece.

There had been Protos here once, humans enhanced by the Galen and returned to Earth to play gods. They were gone now; at least that was the official story. Alexius had no cause to question that.

Olympians' speech was archaic, but still closer to that of his homeworld than any he had previously encountered. They lived archaic lives and thought archaic thoughts -- pursuing arts and amusements like re-creations of Greek drama and Greek academies.

They had access to plays of Sophocles and texts of Aristotle that had been lost on Earth. They could recite the epics of Homer and other poets whose very names had been forgotten in the land whence their remote ancestors had come. But they produced nothing new.

Still, their lives were not actually as archaic as they imagined; the model for pure democracy of their world, that of Athens, was hardly representative of ancient Greece as a whole. Moreover, it was unencumbered by the slave class on which its counterpart in classical times had depended. Robots took the place of that class.

Olympians had once served as Seeders for the Galen, the Scalantrans had told him, and people here had never denied it. Perhaps they still had Harvesting operations in progress; that could account for the lack of men of technological expertise in high positions, which positions were instead held by Great Ladies -- of whom there had been few or none in the age of Homer or Plato.

A Great Lady summoned him one night.

This particular Great Lady was elderly, but far from frail. From her carriage and demeanor, Alexius judged that she had once been a great beauty. Perhaps she carried Latent genes of the Galen.

She had never been offworld, it was said. So it came as a surprise when she addressed him in Velorian -- a language he remembered still, although he had not had occasion to use it in many years. She noticed that he was looking past her, at a marble statue.

"Yes, I was," she said, after serving him wine, having seemingly read his thoughts. "That was me."

The statue was carved in the ancient manner -- and also painted in the ancient manner. The colors, Alexius imagined, were more lifelike than those available to the ancient Greeks.

"I enjoyed diverse lovers in those days," the Lady told him. "These days, of course...."

She quickly came to the point. Alexius demurred.

"So you think I'm an old hag?"

"Not at all," he said. And it was true: there was an elegance to her that still shone through, despite the ravages of age.

"You'd be wearing gold, of course," the Lady said. Her overture was obvious.

Alexius explained that gold would not affect the invulnerability of his sperm. He explained the consequences of that bluntly.

"But I don't have long to live in any case," the Lady insisted. "It would be so thrilling to go out with a Velorian in my arms. I've never had a Velorian."

"You have been misinformed. I am not a Velorian."

"I know what you are. I have made inquiries. And you are a Velorian in all but name. It's the fantasy that counts. My bedchamber awaits you. Love me, and I shall die happy."

"It wouldn't be like that," Alexius said. "A few moments of pleasure followed by days of agony. That's how it would be. I know whereof I speak."

And he told her about Zakiti.

"You are a true gentleman," the Lady said. "You pass the test."

"Test?"

She began to shimmer in the air. A soft glow enveloped her. Her aged flesh began to... flow. Moments later, the glow faded, and there stood before him a goddess -- so beautiful he could hardly bear to look upon her.

"I show my true self to a few," she said. "Then I dim my light, lest it burn them."

The Great Lady shapeshifted again, more subtly, becoming only the kind of beautiful woman who inspires men's fantasies. As she inspired his now. Yet his desire for her was tinged with fear. Surely he was not worthy of a Galen, for what else could this creature be?

"Fear not," she told him. "Did I not tell you that you have passed my test? And surely you must know that you cannot harm me. Make love to the goddess, and I shall make you a god."

Alexius stood transfixed, gazing at this incredible vision of erotic loveliness. Eyes that blazed blue, lips that begged to be kissed, smoothly muscled arms that

he imagined holding him tight, legs that any dancer or athlete would have died for, breasts that stood proudly from her chest, a perfect cleft where her legs joined.

"I can't stand it," he murmured as he saw her nipples stiffen, as he saw the moisture gather at the entrance to her womanhood. His cock was in pain from the ache of his own desire.

"Here is the end of all pain," the goddess told him, and took him into her, let him explode within her. And that was only the beginning.

They made love for hours -- or was it days? They made love in all the myriad ways -- slowly and quickly, gently and violently. Alexius completely lost track of how many times he had come -- in her cunt, in her mouth, on her breasts. Intoxicated by her divine pheromones, he was always ready for more. He lost track of how many times he had made her come, sucking her breasts, sucking her clit, man on top, woman on top, positions he'd never dreamed of.

After all the years of wandering, after all the years of loneliness, he felt that he had come home at last....

"My name is Aphro'dite," she said. "But some call me Saphro."

She had been the Goddess of Love to the remote ancestors of those now living on this world, and among those Harvested to Olympia had been the worshippers who gathered at shrines to her. That had been long ago, before the final war with the Elders, before the foundation of Velor.

"Would that I could bear you sons, for they would surely be heroes," she told him.

Alexius knew why she couldn't; that was part of the founding myth of Velor, which Kalla had shared with him more than a century ago.

But Aphro'dite would not tell him the truth behind the myth.

"Some things are best left unsaid. Mystery has its uses, beyond the uses of knowledge. In any case, you and I are about to create a new myth."

There was a crisis on Velor, she explained, but none there knew it. In the Aurean Empire, Velor had created its own nemesis, but none there would admit it. The Senate and the High Council had taken half-measures, but these were no longer enough. Innocents were suffering on innocent worlds, despite the best efforts of the Companions.

Alexius knew that Companions had become warriors since his time, that Kalla herself had led the defense of Andros against the Empire.

"One such Companion, who saw the truth, who saw the need, attempted to reason with the High Council and the Senate. The Council would not hear her out, and the Senate would not hear her at all; for they thought nothing of her and were offended by her companion -- an ordinary man whom she had enhanced, even as Kalla enhanced you.

"Surely this was forbidden, they said, else the Galen would have given token of it. But the Galen do not work that way; we do not even always work in concert. Furthermore, we allow for contingencies, we always allow for contingencies.

"Enhancement was one of those, as are the Latents -- those with gene sets making them especially susceptible to the process. You were fortunate to bear

that set, or your transformation would have been severely limited -- had it succeeded at all."

"It was mere chance?"

"But Velorians can sense Latents, without realizing it. Another contingency, which may yet have its further uses. For now, however, we must deal with the crisis at hand. The Aureans are becoming more powerful, as are their weapons. We cannot intervene against them directly, but neither can we allow them to prevail."

Aphro'dite outlined her plan. The Protectors. The Messengers. The warriors, whom she herself would enhance, and their couriers and counselors likewise. She would bless them all in the name of Skietra.

"Has she approved?"

"She has not disapproved. I am allowed a certain... latitude. Within the limits of the Directive."

"Directive?"

"I must do no more than absolutely necessary to accomplish the end in view. I may not interfere with the social structure and culture of Velor, whatever their failings. Such changes must come from within. It will go hard for the Protectors, yet you and those who follow you may help them endure."

"The Messengers. They will be more than they seem."

"Indeed. But never let the others know it. To them, the Messengers will be but their servants. Just as you will be but mine, when you first appear to the rulers of Velor."

"What will I tell them?"

"That you are my Messenger."

"Why should they believe me?"

"You will fly to the shrine of Skietra, on the day that they honor her."

"I cannot fly. And none can fly on Velor. That much I know,"

"I shall provide you the means."

"What is your message?"

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

The End – and the Beginning

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Note: Scalantrans, having always lived most of their lives on shipboard, reckon time by generations (13.32 Terran years), each divided into 12 subgenerations (1.11 Terran years, or 405.15 Terran days. But instead of days, they then go by shifts — 1728 to a subgeneration, or about 5.6 Terran hours each. For more details, see:

<http://www.brightempire.com/AUCalendar.htm>.

One age is ending. A new age begins in Shadar's *First Protector*.

http://www.velorian.net/auow/first_protector.htm