

Lifesaver

By Shadar and Brantley

These were the bright years, although none called them that at the time. After the Madstop Conference and the creation of the Enlightenment, the seeded worlds that had aligned with Velor were at peace, the threat of the Aurean Empire seemingly lifted – thanks to the Protectors, some of them enhanced Companions who knew and loved their worlds and peoples from long service there.

As for the nonaligned worlds, their neutrality was formally respected by the Enlightenment and the Empire alike, according to treaty. Velor and Aurea both maintained embassies or consulates or trade missions there. Their influence was limited to the power of persuasion – and the power of example. Small weapons, it might seem, of little account. And sometimes their wielders knew not what they did. They were only being themselves.

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Muhammad knew she was dead as soon as the generator failed. His wife was inside the vault, and its only source of air was the electrically driven fan.

The vault itself – 120 tons of hardened steel – required power to unlock and open the massive door. Its emergency battery power had been depleted during the power failure – the last of its power closing the vault as a security measure.

Utility power had gone off two days ago after the big storm, a storm like none before even on a world that was known for its fierce climate and fiercer weather. The force of wind and water had torn into the very ground, severing power lines

that were still weeks away from repair now that calm had returned. The bank's generator had held things together – until now.

The clock on the wall ticked off the remaining minutes of his wife's life. The two hours of air in the vault was now down to less than forty minutes, and the mechanics had decided that the injection pump on the engine had failed. They didn't have a spare, and the closest engine shop was an hour away, assuming they could get through the debris-clogged streets.

Muhammad had put in a frantic call to the Aurean Consulate to ask for help – they had several Primes stationed on the planet now – but got only an infernal answering machine that said all the staff had left the planet to weather the storm in their orbiting ship.

A glance at the clock said thirty minutes remained. It was hopeless. A single moment of carelessness on his part and Nahlia was going to pay the price with her life. Better that he was in there with her. Life without her would not be worth living.

Nahlia was not only his wife but his partner, his closest confidant. Here on what most named Kawbab an Nabi, that was unusual. Most men shunned the company of women, except abed, following traditions laid down by the *haditha*, the supposed sayings. Muhammad was among those who questioned the validity of the *haditha*, believing that they twisted the words of the Prophet, blessed be his name, as set down in the Qur'an.

Muhammad was also among those who believed that naming a planet for the Prophet was idolatrous, and therefore called it simply Al Alam, the world. And yet he was pious. His bank was founded on Islamic law, investing in enterprises and nurturing them to ensure mutual profit, rather than engaging in usury. Nahlia had an uncanny sense for the right investments, even keener than his own, for which he nightly thanked Allah as they nightly made love.

Nahlia, too, was pious, modest in her dress and conduct, yet leading the Women's Group at Friday prayers, at a mosque that was enlightened in such

matters. She it was who counseled the women, almost like an imam, on a world where imams were in constant dispute over matters like the calendar -- the consensus was to call 354 local days a year even though neither the days nor the years matched those on Earth. The Seeders had taught the faithful how to locate Earth, and therefore Mecca, in the heavens, and left it at that.

When the power failed, Nahlia had been filing contracts for investment in a mining syndicate. It was a sound investment, sure to enrich both the syndicate and the bank. Only she would not live to see the fruits of her labor. The contracts would be a monument to her, but he did not wish for a monument. Neither would their children, safe at home, whom he could not bear to tell.

As Muhammad stared despondently at the floor, feeling hopeless and lost without Nahlia, a pair of bare feet came into view, dripping water on the marble floor of the lobby. Despite his despair, his mind ticked off the details as it always had: lean, strong tendons, no nail polish, the feet looked as if they'd never worn shoes, yet without calluses.

Bare feet in his bank lobby?

She had paused before the decorative planter. He traced his eyes upward across long, tightly-muscled legs and a narrow waist, daringly upward until his and his heart froze as he found himself staring at a nearly naked bosom. He quickly forced his eyes further upward to see intensely blue eyes and short, blonde hair. Then he snapped his eyes closed, trying to block out the scandalous image that confronted him.



It was Gema, the sole member of the tiny Velorian trade mission from across the street. She was the only Velorian who had ever visited his world, given that Kawbab an Nabi was leaning towards joining the Aurean Empire to gain its protection. Gema was infamous for her scandalous dress and the way she left her hair uncovered, an unwelcome temptation for all men who saw her. Clearly, unlike the Aureans, she had no interest in conforming to their culture, but had instead proudly proclaimed the heathen-like culture of Velor.

Gema's scandalously revealing clothing had been further reduced by the rain, her blouse nearly transparent from wetness, her hair wet and tousled, her skin soaked from the persisting rain. She looked around him at the vault, and then back at him, saying she was sorry for dripping on his floor and looking like this, but she'd been out rescuing people when she saw people trying to reopen the vault. She hadn't had time to change.

Muhammad, like every other man in the bank, had secretly admired Gema's figure and stature as she came and went from her office across the street. She was 6'3" tall and blonde, and she didn't cover her hair like other women, often wearing dresses that revealed a portion of her legs. And never did a head scarf conceal her blonde tresses.

Yet despite her stature, one of his employees had read somewhere that she was a Brava, the lowest genetic class, leaving him wondering what the upper genetic classes must be like. He prayed he'd never see one – Gema was distraction enough, often requiring him to say many more prayers after he met her on the street. Prayers for God's veil to cover his eyes and quiet his thoughts.

Sheikh Abraxas, leader of the conservatives here, had recently demanded that Gema leave the planet, hoping to avoid any conflict with the Aurean diplomats who were now arriving. They at least knew how to attire themselves properly to not offend, their women wearing burqas, only their eyes visible.

Muhammad forgot all that as he blurted out his problem to Gema: the inoperable vault door, his wife trapped inside, air running out.

Gema looked at the vault, her intensely blue eyes opening wide, seemingly giving off more light than they took in. Turning, she walked over to stand in front of the massive vault door. Five feet thick, made of the best steel available, it was supposedly impregnable. She rested her chin on her hand while studying the door, and then opened her eyes even wider.

The room suddenly flashed as brightly as if an arc welder had just been turned on, the dazzle blinding Mohammed. By the time he'd blinked away the spots, he saw two thin red beams converging on a spot that slowly traced around and around the center locking mechanism of the door.

The steel it touched heated to red hot, then blue and finally white, visibly softening, the metal starting to flow as the beams melted their way deeper and deeper into the door, leaving the center locking wheel intact. She kept her blazing eyes focused on the steel as she calmly told Mohammed to be ready to flood the vault with the fire extinguishing system – a system Muhammad knew would eliminate the last oxygen in the room, but would cool the air dramatically.

The heat was soon so intense that he had to stand well behind Gema, noticing as his employees already had that her wet, clinging dress was nearly as transparent as her top, her buttocks on full display. Her near nudity was an offense to the Prophet, but nothing mattered now except getting Nahlia out. He would say many prayers if she survived, including ones that would hopefully erase Gema's image from his mind.

Molten steel was soon flowing down the front of the vault and spreading out across the floor in waves, pooling around her bare feet. Her scanty attire began to steam and then smolder before bursting into flames from the heat; praise be to Allah that she was facing away from him and that he could not see...

The huge vault door was sagging inward when Gema called out for the fire extinguisher system to be triggered. Muhammad did it himself, knowing she would no longer have air to breath. He'd earlier condemned Nahlia by sending her to the vault – if she died, no one else would carry the blame.

Gema leaped forward and threw herself into the white-hot hole she'd cut in the vault door, tearing at the softened steel with her hands, fingers digging deep as she ripped and tore handfuls of the metal away. Naked muscles flexed with alien power as molten steel dripped all over her bare skin. In seconds she'd torn a far larger hole in the center of the vault, but a layer of steel still blocked the entrance. She braced her back against one side of the hole and her legs on the other and pushed, her legs turning hard with steel muscles. The massive door, nearly as thick as Mohammed was tall, weakened in the center, gave off an earsplitting groan and began to bend outward as she straightened her long legs. A blast of white fire extinguishing vapor exploded outward the last layer of steel tore open. She wriggled herself inside, and then opening bulged outward and grew larger yet as massive blows shook the floor, knocking Mohammed off his feet. He looked up in time to see molten steel bursting outward as Gema flew through the suddenly larger hole, her body wrapped around a far smaller form — Nahlia!

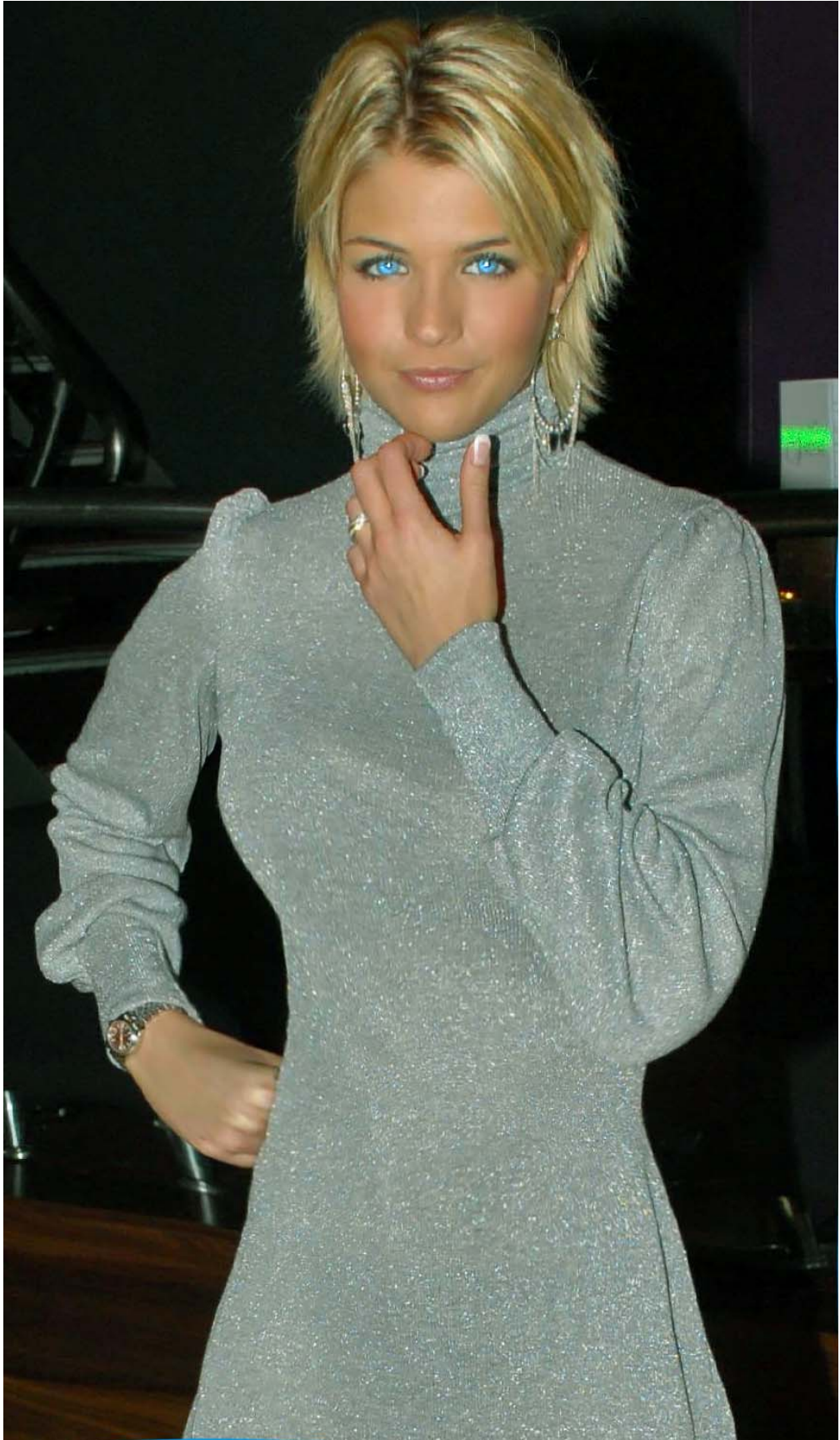
Gema set Nahlia down, and his wife rushed to Muhammad's arms, her clothing smoking. He held her as she gasped for air, her legs too weak to stand.

She was alive!

By the time he looked up from his love, Gema was gone.

Muhammad was a man of influence, through successful enterprises that had contributed to the general prosperity. Once he recovered from the joy of having his wife back, he sent letters to the Sheikh and to every other member of the government, telling of Gema's effort to save lives, comparing it to the Aureans, who floated blissfully above the atmosphere, leaving them to fend for themselves.

The Sheikh himself called him back, and said he was reconsidering ordering the Velorian mission closed. Perhaps there was still room for some dialogue with the Velorians.



Gema came by to thank him for his note – modestly dressed this time – and he and Nahlia invited her to their home to meet his children and his parents. Their youngest daughter, Toupon, placed her hand in Gema's and wouldn't let go, even at dinner. She was still terrified at having nearly lost her mother, and sought the security of hands that could bend steel.

For the first time, Mohammed didn't shun Gema, and instead listened to her appeal. She in turn spoke of the many ways that the Velorians could act as lifesavers on their world. Protectors of the weak. Fighting for justice. She was their friend, no matter how she dressed or acted.

The evening ended with Muhammad and Nahlia and their family celebrating life – a life they owed to Gema.

Two months later, at Muhammad's urging, his world opened formal relations with Velor, inviting more of its representatives to come and discuss what the Enlightenment could offer them. To talk of alliance.

In such a way, a simple spark of kindness overcame the cultural gap between the world of the Prophet and Velor, and saved an entire world.

These were the bright years, although none called them that at the time. The worlds of the Enlightenment were united in trade and, with the discovery of the Quantum Electric Drive, even passenger travel – albeit none at the time foresaw all the consequences of that, for humans or Scalantrans or supremis.

Ordinary people didn't know about matters like the Compact, under which the Scalantrans agreed to make outward peace with and trade with the Empire while actually gathering intelligence for Velor. Ordinary people didn't understand the growing influence of human and other Adopts on the Scalantrans, and the dire consequences that would ensue. And ordinary people never knew that the Aureans, seemingly resigned to peace in face of the power of the Enlightenment, were only biding their time as their laboratories prepared for the genetic wars.