

Murk and Reprisal

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With Velvet Belle Tree

EPILOGUE

Had the Imperials known that The *Spirit of Youth* was entering the system when it did, the fugitive Tanzrobians would never have gotten away with their desperate gamble. They were fortunate in that regard. So were the Scalantrans.

But they had a powerful ally: the stupidity of the Arion Command, which hadn't thought to find out when the Scalantrans' next visit was due, because it had never considered the possibility that any of the "primitive" Tanzrobians might already know.

The *Spirit of Youth* had proceeded out of the wormhole with caution, although Travel Captain Zaykom wasn't particularly concerned. He'd heard about Nova Iberia, but that could have been just an isolated incident. In any case, it involved a secondary world – not one of those seeded by the Galen themselves. The Arions would never dare....

So Zaykom could hardly believe his senses when the board lit up with indications of unknown spacecraft, and the com came alive with a warning in heavily-accented Scalantran: "Turn about! Flee! Main engines out, but we can still catch you. If you have weapons, prepare to use them."

A small ship, easily recognizable as the sort of private yacht favored by the more ostentatious Arion lords, was fast approaching. For a crazy moment, Zaykom thought that it was hostile -- but then he took in the battle damage and, more importantly, the much larger icon of an Imperial cruiser closing in.

Zaykom used his double thumbs to send the unlock command to the controls for missile batteries that had been hastily installed amidships at Meetpoint 22, leaving the hastily-trained crewmen assigned to them to hurriedly calculate trajectories and send a volley on its way.

He didn't wait to see if the missiles made it, but took the yacht's advice and turned the *Spirit* about. The speeding yacht overtook the trade ship, but Zaykom didn't slow down for a second; rather, he accelerated to match velocities. Whoever was manning the yacht seemed to know about docking maneuvers, or at least his systems did.

The Imperials were sure to return fire, but were apparently confused by the sudden and unexpected appearance of the massive – and armed – vessel out of the gravitational miasma that surrounded the terminus. It took them crucial moments to overcome their shock.

Whether by training or sheer beginners' luck, the missiles reached their target. The cruiser must have taken damage, but surely not fatal. Yet the Imperials still seemed to be hesitating. Zaykom used the respite to let the yacht match airlocks with the *Spirit* and ordered a docking collar extended to create an air passage between the ships.

A man and two women -- their dark skin marking them as Tanzrobians -- practically flew through the lock. The second dragged a white man wearing a gold collar: evidently an Arion. When she indicated that all were accounted for, the lock was closed, the connection broken and the *Spirit of Youth* sped to and through the wormhole, escaping the belated counterattack of the cruiser's batteries,

The Tanzrobians' leader, Mbali -- she who said she had learned Scalantran at trade fairs -- told their story. Zaykom could well believe it. He had to. But he couldn't understand it.

They wanted to go to Velor, for help against the invaders. That was what Mbali told him. They carried urgent news of some new Arion weapon -- a weapon they had carried in the yacht. Only, Mbali suddenly realized, it had been left behind in their haste to board the Spirit after the cruiser had attacked...

Zaykom was annoyed. Velor was way off his ship's route. It would mean no end of trouble to accommodate the Azizi. And yet he owed them -- owed them for the warning, without which he and his ship would surely have been doomed.

The Arions had meant to commandeer the next trading ship to enter the system, Mbali said; kill most of its crew, and force the rest to help them attack other Scalantrans.

What was he to do?

I

"Why are you doing this to us?" Mbali asked.

“Doing to you? We’re not doing anything to you, except liberate you from ignorance and superstition. We’re bringing you civilization.”

Arkabad Tschokke talked as if he believed it. He looked as if he believed it.

“And ‘civilization’ consists of destroying our villages, murdering us by the thousands?”

“Only a demonstration,” Tschokke insisted. “Only a *de-mon-stra-tion*. We demonstrate our strength so that you may appreciate the benefits of allying yourselves with the Empire, which can now offer you far better protection than you ever received from the Galen.”

“You would do well to fear the Galen, even now.”

“It seems that the Galen have other things on their minds than this little world and its winds and ways. The Geheimites, perhaps. Have you heard of the Geheimites? Of course not; they would not trouble you about that, any more than they would trouble you about our adversaries the Velorians. Of whom, I dare say, you have heard little.”

Why should I argue with this man? Mbali wondered. We’re beaten, after all. Even Zanele admit’s we’re beaten.

Word of their defeat had first come from voices that shouted out of the sky. The sky had been filled with voices, just as it had been filled with black aircraft by day and the lights of those aircraft by night.

“Salimu ama angamia,” the voices had screamed. “Surrender or die.”

The voices had not been believed at first, even though they spoke their language and claimed to be those of their own people.

“Aka!” many had shouted back, their fists shaking. “Never!”

Yet in the Wild, where the Ilanga Elikhazimulayo or Bright Sun people, had joined with fugitives from other clans in futile attempts at resistance, there were repeated tales of pillars of fire by day and pillars of smoke by night where villages had once stood.

It was the runners who were finally believed – runners who, like Zanele, were of the *masaba*, the highest of the septs, defenders of the clans. It was Bheka, a male whose name ironically meant “take care of,” who had found the Bright Sun People. And it was he who led them back to their village – what had been their village.

Zanele had been enlisted by him as a runner to spread the word westwards. She would be returning.... whenever.

The village itself was unrecognizable. The native mud and thatched huts, burned in their retreat months ago, had been replaced by a large structure made of something called concrete, surrounded by concentric circles of what the Arions called pre-fab homes.

Arkabad Tschokke held forth in the central structure. He was a colonel in the occupation forces, but he also styled himself Lord Protector of the Bright Sun people. Perhaps that was some sort of a joke. Mbali hadn't asked.

A number of the huts were already occupied: refugees from other clans, whose numbers were too diminished for their villages to be reconstructed. The Lord Protector had adopted them into the Bright Sun clan. For this, he seemed to expect Mbali to be grateful. Only...

“There are *makwanza* and *mananu* among them,” she complained, when the Lord Protector identified their former clans. “We are *mapili*.”

The Lord Protector just shrugged. “What is your point?”

“We do not mix septs in one village,” Mbali answered, shocked by the man’s ignorance.

“Except for the *masaba*, of course,” Tschokke corrected her.

Then he roared with laughter.

“You see, I am not ignorant of your ways,” he said. “This has been a most *ed-ju-ca-tion-al* experience. For you, it has been an *ed-ju-ca-tion-al* opportunity. I hope you have been sufficiently *ed-ju-ca-ted*. As for the septs, they will just have to learn to get along, to live with each other. That will be *ed-ju-ca-tional* for all of them.”

He paused for a moment and gave a hollow chuckle.

“It will be an even greater *ed-ju-ca-tion-al* opportunity for your guardian when she returns. Not that you need a guardian any longer. *I* am your guardian. I shall watch over you. I shall especially watch over Zanele. From what I’ve been told, she’ll be in need of someone to watch over her.”

His laughter sent a chill up Mbali’s spine.

2

Arkabad wanted Zanele to remember him in her prayers. In fact, he wanted her to pray to him. He had made this plain as soon as she had returned from her

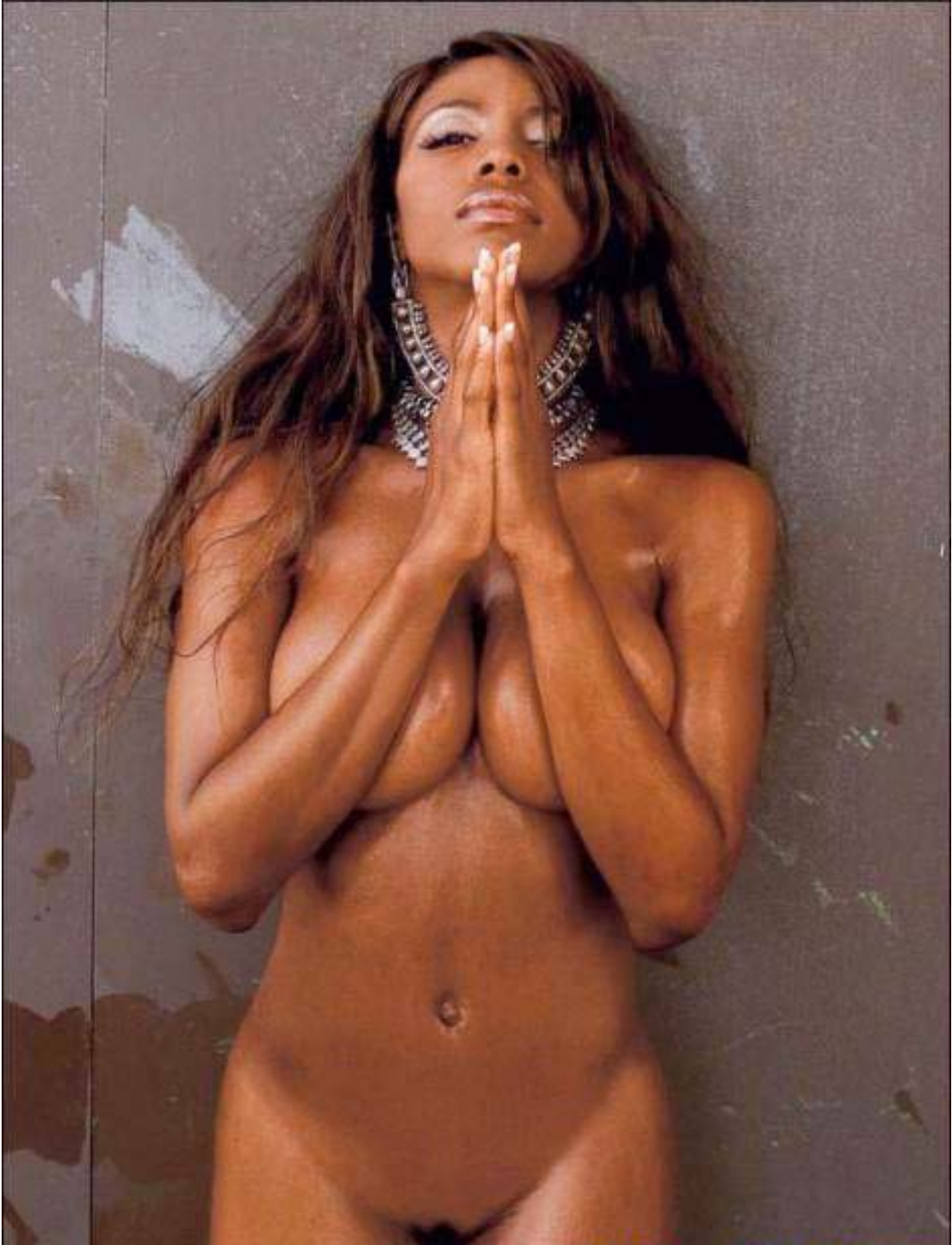
journeys and been advised to report to him -- even before seeing Mbali, let alone the others she knew.

“After all,” he told her, “I am here, and the Galen are not. It is from me that now on all blessings flow. The Empire brings its blessings, and I dispense them. Your people should be properly grateful, yourself most of all. You should be grateful for future as well as past blessings, prayerfully grateful.”

Zanele would rather have sent Arkabad to the Devil, but he was a Prime and, even if he were not, there were other Primes. And there was the Weapon -- the terrible weapon, the weapon that could destroy her.

Perhaps it could destroy him, too. That was why the one she captured after it had killed her partner had been carefully hidden. Some of the Bright Sun people had wanted to turn it against the Arions immediately, but Mbali had cautioned against that: none knew how long it might continue to function. It should be saved for whenever and wherever it might do the most good.

Arkabad must never be allowed to suspect. Therefore, Zanele must show obeisance outwardly, even though she was seething inwardly. Mbali, who knew more of the Arions than anyone else in the village by reason of her contacts with the Scalantrans, had so counseled her.



Pray she must then, for the sake of her people.

Arkabad took her prayers to be for, among other things, the dubious pleasures of his company. He took her as if she were a Beta, laying her on the rough floor and slamming his cock into her. Because, unlike a Beta, she was as powerful and invulnerable as himself, he could be as rough with her as he pleased.

“You won’t wear out,” he told her, in a tone as close to admiration as was possible to him. “Oh no, you won’t wear out.”

When he had learned that the *masaba* were blessed with heat vision, he had insisted that she try it out on him. Try it out on his cock, that is. “I want to be your hot lover,” he beamed. “Your *really* hot lover.”

She obliged him in this, as she obliged him in all things, although some of them offended her sensibilities. He’d ask her, for example, to spread animal blood on her chest and goaded a captive lion into attacking her. Azizi respected the wild beasts of Tanzrobi; the Galen had not brought them here as toys for the sport of dissolute humans. They might be killed, rarely, if they endangered Azizi of the lesser septs – but never exploited.

“Whose teeth feel better on your breasts?” he’d ask, after his perverted exercise in foreplay. Besides his teeth and his hands, he would sometimes bring weapons to bear – not *the* weapon, of course. He couldn’t hurt her breasts that way, but she still hurt inside. And yet, she knew that she could never show that.

Zanele would moan appropriately, and sometimes scream. She thought about Thabo, but she could not bear to think about the pleasure they had shared. Instead, she thought about his last moment, the better to moan in pain and

scream in anger: Arkabad couldn't tell the difference; he thought she was reveling in their encounters.

3

Mbali had already told her that the *Spirit of Youth* was due to land on a certain day the following summer.

"How can you know this?" Zanele asked.

"I was told by the trade captain of the *Star Chaser*."

"Why should you believe him?"

"The Scalantrans are extremely honest, and extremely punctual."

"Of what use is this knowledge?"

"None," Mbali admitted.

But that was before the *Screaming Kintz*.

The *Screaming Kintz* was Tschokke's personal yacht. A kintz was some sort of semi-intelligent cat on a world very far away. The Empire was selectively breeding kintzi as warriors, Tschokke explained; his last assignment had been training prototypes.

"Nasty creatures," he allowed. "Extremely nasty. But the universe will hear of them; they will strike fear in the hearts of all who encounter them."

Perhaps they already had, because the yacht was a belated reward for his work with them. It had been brought here at considerable trouble and expense because, it seemed, Tschokke had the requisite family connections – the same connections that had put him in charge of the Kintz project in the first place, and

had now given him a village to rule. A region, actually, it turned out; but Tschokke rarely visited the other villages, leaving Betan aides to see to their affairs.

Mbali endeavored to find out why, approaching the question in a roundabout way to avoid raising any suspicions. She didn't know who to trust among the newcomers, or even the original villagers.

"There are no *masaba* at the other villages," she reported to Zanele, making certain nobody else was within earshot.

"The new weapon? The GAR?"

She knew what it was called now. Tschokke had spoken of it, to intimidate her.

"I didn't ask, but there was mention of such a thing. Only that isn't the important thing. Not right now."

"What is?"

"There's nobody else for him to fuck. At least, not unless he orders up some Betas."

"There *are* female Primes."

"Undoubtedly. I can only surmise that they aren't available to him. I have no idea why. But it's obvious he's become fixated on you."

"Too true to be good. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up."

"You must," Mbali insisted.

Zanele didn't believe it, until some months later when Tschokke invited her for a flight on the yacht. The *Screaming Kintz* had by then become a familiar sight in the skies over the region, often flying low and loudly over the villages to

overawe the Tanzrobians. But sometimes in vanished for a day or two – elsewhere over the planet, maybe into space.

She'd expected Tschokke to take her on one of the low-level flights, to show off how many villages he commanded. Her first surprise came shortly after they'd boarded. She had expected that he would use some sort of manual controls to fly the ship; but instead he talked to it. *Talked* to it.

Somehow his words made the ship take off. Made it rise, turn to fly across the landscape, then rise again, until the sky turned purple and then black...

"You've never seen your world this way, have you?" he asked as he invited her to gaze at a pattern of white and green that appeared on a viewscreen – but so clear it could have been a window. He pointed to a break in the cloud cover. "That's your village down there. You don't have to take my word for it."

He directed her to a screen, on which she could see an image of the Bright Sun village from close up – only above, as if she were a bird. It looked as ugly as it did from the ground, but she forbore to say so.

"You're seeing what you imagined the Galen saw. But, as you know by now, there are no Gaen here."

Zanele nodded in assent.

"I shall put us into orbit now, and introduce you to a totally new experience."

When Zanele didn't rise to the bait, Tschokke had to elaborate.

"Fucking in zero gravity."

He said something to the ship again. The *Screaming Kintz* shot upwards, but also sideways; she could see the world move beneath her.

Within a few minutes, she learned the meaning of “zero gravity.” Within a few more minutes, she also learned what it was like to fuck there: no better than fucking anywhere else with Tschokke.

But that wasn't the most important thing she learned. The really important thing was that she wanted to learn the Arion language.

4

“The first thing is, don't tell *him*,” Mbali advised Zanele.

“He might be flattered.”

“He might also be suspicious. Even stupid people aren't stupid all the time.”

“So what should I do?”

“What about Pimponeous?”

Pimponeous was Tschokke's aide-de-camp, supernumerary, or whatever Tschokke wanted him to be. Being a Beta, it was his job to do all the boring work of administration, leaving his liege to strut and fuck.

“What about him?” Zanele said.

“Tell him you want to learn Arion, but *not* to tell Tschokke. Tell him you want to surprise your lord and master.”

Mbali knew Pimponeous from going over accounts. It pleased Tschokke to believe that he was letting the Tanzrobians have a real say in the doings of the village and the region, and it also pleased him to let his aide see to the details.

Her say in decisions was in fact minimal, but she knew that she could avoid trouble if she signed off on sundry financial and administrative documents. It also

gave her some idea of what was actually going on. For example, Tschokke had it in mind to create a regional council from the ranks of village chiefs and Beta sub-chiefs.

“*Harambe*,” was how Pimponeous put it to her, having had it put to him by Tschokke. How or why had the Lord Protector learned Azizi for “Let’s pull together?” Perhaps he wasn’t as stupid as he seemed. More likely, some *msalati* trying to curry favor with the invaders had suggested it. She hoped the traitor wasn’t in her own village, but....

That was why Zanele was her only confidant.



Since returning to the village, since her initial encounter with the Lord Protector, she had established a formal and correct relationship with Tschokke. She dressed modestly and correctly, spoke modestly and correctly, and had been rewarded according to the Lord Protector's fashion – or whim.

She had managed to work things out among members of different septs in the village, and even prevailed upon the Arion leader to establish a registry of missing persons that could reunite families and perhaps find potential new mates of the right sept for the widowed. She could look him in the eye now, when the occasion called for it.

It was, as he had said, an educational opportunity.

But she never forgot who or what she was. She never gave up

5

“Oh, he'll be so pleased,” Pimponeous said. “I can hardly *wait* to see the look on his face.”

He paused a moment.

“You haven't told any of your own people, have you?”

Zanele nodded.

“That is so good to know,” he said. “It wouldn't do to spoil the surprise, no it wouldn't do at all. And you came to *just* the right man.”

Zanele looked around, as if to make sure they were alone.

“Well, of course I'm the only man. The only Arion man. The only Arion man besides Arkabad, that is. But I have a turn for language.”

His attitude was enough to turn her stomach.

“Before I joined the service, I was educated at our finest university,” he said. “I know not only the language, but how it evolved. I have memorized the texts of our epics, and can recite them as they should be recited. Arion is a heroic language, the language of heroes. You do well to honor us... him... by your willingness to learn it.”

He paused for a moment.

“Now where shall we begin?”

“I’d like to begin with ‘Lord Protector,’” Zanele offered, as humbly as she could.

“Oh, of course. ‘*Valtias Hooltaya*.’ That has a very interesting derivation. Originally, it referred to one of those who served as our rear guards when we came out of the Dimensional Transporter. Our great to the nth generation grandfathers, I mean. We wished to honor them for their fortitude, although, as it turned out their fortitude wasn’t necessary, inasmuch as the Transporter had ceased to function and the Velorians couldn’t follow us anyway...”

Pimponeous was lost in thought for a moment.

“You’ve heard about the Velorians, of course,” he resumed. “Did you know they sell their women? And they make them with machines to begin with... now where was I? Oh yes, the gene bomb. It was the first of the *valtias hooltaya* who rallied our people after that treacherous attack, and rallied us again after the equally treacherous Scalantran attack. It was such men who created the Empire, who set us on the road to our destiny.”

The Beta was lost in thought again for a moment.

“As I was saying,” he took up again, “the term has an interesting derivation.”

“Yes, yes,” Zanele said. “Most interesting. But let’s continue.”

“Of course, of course. I do tend to get carried away sometimes -- my knowledge is so extensive.”

“Tell me how to say ‘I want you’,” Zanele said, knowing how that would flatter Tschokke’s ego.

“You want me?”

“No.” She wanted to add “you fool” but controlled herself. “I want to be able to say it to Tschokke.”

“Of course, I knew that. What woman wouldn’t want an Arion Prime?”

“But the words...”

“Oh. ‘*Mina tarve te,*’ of course.”

So it went. She didn’t ask about words like “vector” and “wormhole,” but she hoped she could pick those up in the context of words she did learn from Pimponeous. She must do nothing to arouse his suspicions, Mbali had warned her. No matter how silly he might seem, he was still the enemy.

6

Kobe was his name. It meant “tortoise,” but that was only because he had had a slow and difficult birth. He was *akwanza*, the first and original of the septs – and therefore the weakest. But perhaps also the most industrious.

Makwanza often worked as smiths and mechanics, sometimes finding easier ways to make and repair things. And so they had set Kobe to work at the new Bright Sun village; having introduced their own ideas and their own ways of what was needful.

Mbali could hear him grumbling betimes, and that troubled her because it could get him into trouble with the Lord Protector. But then something occurred to her: he could not be a *msalati*. Neither Tschokke nor Pimponeus was subtle enough, she thought, to plant an *mdukizi* among the villagers to sniff out disloyalty to the Empire.

From the registry, she knew that he had lost his wife and children during the invasion, when his own village had been decimated. That counted in his favor. In his former life, he had built and repaired wheeled vehicles, which were uncommon among other septs.

She thought of the weapon, which was so large and heavy that even a Beta had had trouble handling it. But for that, Zanele would never have had a chance to exact revenge for Thabo, or to tell her tale.

If the plan Mbali was forming in her mind were to succeed, they would need the weapon. They would need to bring it here, as unobtrusively as they could – disguised as something else. Mbali could not carry it herself, even if she could have justified leaving the village for any length of time to retrieve it. Zanele would even sooner and more surely be missed.

Before the invasion, the migration of the Bright Sun people would have provided the perfect cover for digging up the GAR. But the Arions did not

approve of migrations. They did not want the Azizi too far out of their sight. Let them plant their gardens and fields within a short distance of their villages. The Arions could teach them new methods of tillage, the uses of fertilizer and pesticides, could teach them how to make their land bloom.

Kobe, she knew, had done his part, producing at a hand-made forge such things as plowshares and reaping hooks. It was work he could and did do well, and yet she had never caught him smiling. His concentration seemed as strong as the muscles with which he wielded hammer and tongs. It seemed to take his mind off the harsh reality of the Arions.

It was when he was off work that he would grumble. Work was his only escape. But what if she could provide another.... And Zanele was making progress, she knew. She decided to take a chance. But only a limited chance.

"You hate the Arions as much as I do," Mbali told him one day, out of the blue, without any preliminaries.

Kobe looked at her suspiciously, and she knew that his suspicion was justified.

"We are much alike," she said. "You make tools, I make entries in ledgers and give advice. We can do nothing about the Arions, we tell ourselves; we can only try to make do as best we can for our people."

"My tools can ease their labors. What else can I do?"

"We might do more. We might rise up."

"We might commit suicide."

“There is an Arion weapon -- a weapon that can destroy *masaba* and therefore also destroy the Arion Primes themselves. We have it hidden, and could bring it here – but it is too heavy for any of us to carry.”

Kobe gave her a bitter smile.

“Could we kill Tschokke and his whore together? That would please me, and many others.”

“Zanele is not a whore. She too plays a role, and she is with us. I can say no more.”

“You have said too little. What would you have of me?”

“I would have a vehicle, a device with wheels that could be used to carry the weapon to the village when we are ready to strike.”

“If Zanele is truly with you—“

“She is watched. She would be missed.”

“So am I. So would I.”

“At your workplace, yes. You must build this cart in secret, outside the village. I will find you a place.”

“Forging axles and wheels will be no easy task.”

“Then you had best begin as soon as possible.”

“The Arions will wonder about my absences.”

“You will tell them that you are speaking with the dead. They will assume that there is something wrong with your head, but they won’t care as long as you fulfill your quota of farm tools.”

“You seem to have been thinking of this for some time.”

Indeed I have. Including how to convince you. May I be forgiven!

She looked at him now. He was a good man. He deserved better than she was giving him – the whole truth, and her whole trust. But she was afraid – afraid of what could still go wrong, afraid of what would happen if he were to learn that he was being left behind while she and Zanele left for... wherever.

If she could pull it off. If they could leave at all.

7

It was too good to be true.

“Have you ever seen another world?” Tschokke asked Zanele a few weeks later. “Do you even know that there are other worlds in this system?”

Of course she did, but she feigned ignorance, the better to flatter the Lord Protector. *Valtias Hooltaya* – only it was too soon for that. Likewise for “*Mina tarve te.*” And when it was the right time, she hoped they would be the last words he’d ever hear.

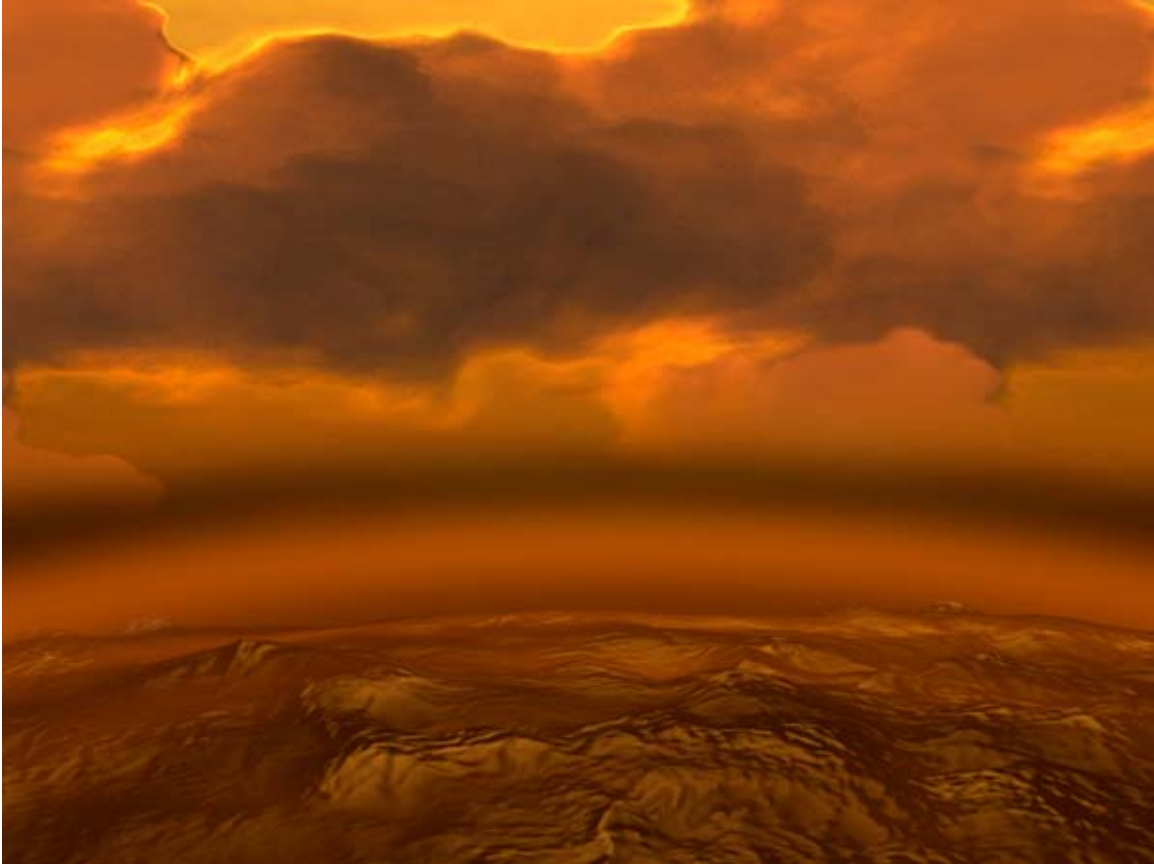
The *Screaming Kintz* was parked a short distance from the village, beyond a *chaka*. It was rocky ground past the tangle of scrubby trees and bushes -- no good for crops or grazing; Tschokke had sense enough not to waste fertile land, at least, and the stones wouldn’t suffer from the takeoffs and landings.

The yacht was a useless luxury, except for the use she one day hoped to make of it. There was enough room for a dozen people. Much of the space was taken up by a large central hall with a series viewscreens that she might once have mistaken for windows if she hadn’t known better.

The takeoff was routine. She had memorized the commands for that, and knew what they meant. She could have done it herself. But she still needed to familiarize herself with things like vectors – these involved some sort of math; perhaps Mbali could help her with that. But if she could somehow learn the verbal command for the wormhole...

Zanele had no idea where they were going this time, but she had been told that none of the other worlds in this system were fit to live on, and was thus surprised to hear the word “sunward” as Tschokke addressed the ship.

Their destination turned out to be the world her people called the Morning Star. From a distance, it showed as a dull brownish orb, with hardly any surface detail. That was an illusion, the Lord Protector explained; the planet was simply enshrouded in clouds of dust raised by winds that raged between the night and day sides as it revolved far more slowly than Tanzrobi.



The surface looked even bleaker; indeed, it was hard for Zanele to make out the horizon.

“Don’t try to breathe,” Tschokke advised. “If the Galen did their work right, you won’t need to. Anyway, it’s all carbon dioxide and sulfur dioxide out there. Deadly to lesser beings than ourselves, even if it weren’t for the heat.”

“Why...”

She hesitated, but then continued. She already knew that Tschokke would want to fuck.

“Why here?”

“To relish you as a supremis should be relished. Your friend Mbali would be carbonized in less than a minute, but you... it will be delicious.”

With that, he cycled them through the lock. She immediately felt the heat – harsh at first, but then diminishing to a pleasant glow as her body adjusted. Mbali had told her that *apili* reacted similarly, although at a far lower range of temperatures. The closest she herself had ever come to this was when she had walked through fire to rescue children from a brush blaze.

Tschokke's clothing – Zanele herself wore none, as usual – blackened and then turned to flakes which quickly blew away in the wind. His *zubu* was already rampant as he led her outside, then threw her on the rough ground and mounted her.

"Oh yes!" he cried. "Mbali would be ashes by now. The rest of you would all be ashes. But we can just fuck and fuck."

Tschokke's words disgusted her, but she dared not show it. She tuned him out, thought only of the warmth of the ground. Then, seemingly against her will, she thought of Thabo. If only it could have been *him*, if only it could have been *them*, making love in this delicious heat, pulverizing the jagged rock with their invulnerable bodies, turning this hellish planet into heaven as they came.

She found herself coming at the thought, actually coming for the first time since she had lost her mate. Coming again, and yet again. She was ashamed afterwards, when at last they returned to the *Screaming Kintz*.

Tschokke would never know about that. Zanele fantasized about finding a new lover -- perhaps among the Velorians -- after she and Mbali made their escape. But Tschokke would never know about that, either.

Mbali found herself spending more and more time at the secret location where Kobe was building the cart.

It wasn't that she needed to — she just felt herself being pulled there. She knew that she didn't have to oversee Kobe's work. She had been impressed by how fast he'd caught on when she explained what they needed. And he was making excellent progress.

She realized that she just liked being with him. It felt good being with a man — a man of her own people, that is. Although the Arions were ruggedly masculine, they aroused no sexual feelings in her. They just gave her the horrors. She felt sorry for Zanele, who not only had to be an Arion's frequent sexual partner but had to pretend that she liked it.

Mbali felt that she had to let Kobe know how pleased she was. "Kobe, you've been doing a great job."

"Ah," he said. "You mean for someone of my lowly sept?"

"No. I didn't mean it that way. Anyway, I'm almost as 'lowly' as you in the scheme of things; we're only one degree apart."

Only one degree....

"I'm sorry Mbali. I seem to have forgotten how to speak pleasantly to a woman since my wife was killed."

"You don't have to apologize. I know what it's like."

"Yes, our losses do give us something in common."

"I've been terribly lonely Kobe. I seem to feel better when I'm with you."

“And I’ve enjoyed having you visit me while I’m working.” He paused for a few moments. “You may be *apili*, but you remind me a bit of my wife.”

“I’ll take that as a great compliment.” *I’m only twice as strong as him – if I were atatu, it would be impossible, but...*

“Sometimes I even forget that we’re different septs. At first it seemed so strange to have the septs living together in the same village.”

“Yes. Much has changed since the damned Arions have come.”

“Do you think it’s so bad?” he asked.

“The Arions being here? Of course, I think it’s terrible.”

“No, no, I didn’t mean that. I meant the septs living together.”

“At first I did. It’s against our customs. Now, I’ve gotten used to it and I don’t think it’s bad. But I don’t like having aliens impose changes on us.”

“Yes. I know what you mean. But in the old days, we wouldn’t be talking like this.”

With that remark, he took a step closer to her and opened his arms. Without thinking, Mbali went to him and felt his arms close around her. She shivered when she felt his hard – surprisingly hard -- naked chest press against her erect *matiti*, with only the thin fabric of her blouse between them. Then she felt his hardening *zubu* pressing against her.

She knew then how starved she was for a man – this man. *Oh yes*, she thought. Let it happen!

Without warning, Kobe released her and stepped back. “I’m sorry, Mbali. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“I didn’t mind.”

“No, no. It’s not right. It’s one thing to have huts together in the same village. But to have sex ... That goes too far beyond our customs.”

Mbali couldn’t hide from herself how much she wanted him. In the old days, she wouldn’t have given him a second thought — wouldn’t have thought about the men in any other sept. But now... The whole world had changed. And she knew that as the woman and as a member of a higher sept, it was her place to decide that they should have a relationship.

“Perhaps,” she said, “it’s time for our customs to change. For *us* to make the change. There are so few of us left, if we don’t cross sept lines when we can, we could be in danger of dying out.”

That rationalization had come to her on the spur of the moment. It might or might not be true. She didn’t know whether the septs could interbreed, and even if they couldn’t there were surely enough azizi to rebuild the population – if only they had enough children. But she wanted this man....

Mbali saw Kobe’s face light up.

Mbali removed her blouse and offered him her firm *madodo*. His head went down and he started sucking her *titi* while fondling the other *dodo*. She sighed with pleasure and moaned softly.

His erection was tenting his short kilt. He sucked hard and teased her *matiti* with his teeth. The pleasure came close to pain, but never crossed that line. She held his head against her *madodo* and stroked the muscles of his back.

When Mbali felt her wetness almost drip down her leg, she undid the fastening of her skirt and stepped out of it and Kobe did the same for his kilt. They spent a moment looking at each other in admiration.

“You really are beautiful, Mbali.”

Mbali smiled and went to him, pressing her body against his. He looked around a moment and then took her hand, leading her towards a nearby tree. He leaned against it and drew her to him. Then he lifted her up and impaled her on his hard *zubu*. Just like that; the power of his lust and the wet slickness of her *kuma* overcame that one degree...

It felt wonderful having a man inside her — having *this* strong man inside her. She knew that his strength came not from genetic enhancement but from years of hard work. The muscular arms that she had enjoyed watching at the forge were now on her ass, holding her to him and moving her body. She wrapped her legs and arms around him and gave in to the wonderful rhythm of their coupling. They had both been without for so long that they soon came, in a hard strong climax.

Now they lay down on the ground and stroked and explored each other's bodies with hands and mouths. Kobe knelt between her legs and licked and sucked her the nubbin of her *kinembe* until she thought she'd go out of her mind. She wanted to scream, but was afraid to do so. They were hidden, away from the village, but she didn't want to take a chance. A loud noise could attract unwanted attention — better to be cautious.

Instead, she said: “Now... fuck me now.”

Once more he entered her, but this time they were able to draw it out. Mbali couldn't believe that it was even better than the first time. On and on he went, allowing her to come and come. Finally, he let himself go and she was overjoyed to feel him convulse within her.

Mbali knew that she would soon be missed in the village. She wanted to take him back to her hut. To cook dinner for him. To eat with him. To make love to him in her hut far into the night. But she knew that there was no way to explain their relationship without giving away their secret.

Reluctantly, Mbali stood up and put her clothes back on. "I'd better go now Kobe. People will wonder where I've been."

"Will you come back tomorrow?"

"Of course. How could you doubt it?"

"It's so hard to see you go."

"Perhaps, some day, we can be together."

"Perhaps. When the damned Arions have gone."

"Till tomorrow, Kobe."

"Till tomorrow, Mbali."

Mbali turned and walked away. For awhile, in Kobe's arms, she'd forgotten about the Arions and all that had happened to her people. Now she had to return to reality.

Her only regret was that she hadn't told him the rest of her plan. About the yacht, about the escape. She'd have to tell him tomorrow, she knew – because she wanted him to come with them.

Although it wasn't customary for her sept, Mbali went bare-chested this morning as she remembered her erotic afternoon with Kobe. It was as if she wanted nothing to touch her *madodo* but his hands and lips...



Yet the sight of Lord Protector's residence across the way from her own called her back to her duties – at once onerous and nearly meaningless. The few concessions she had won might be wiped away tomorrow at the whim of

Tschokke, and in any case had surely been granted only to soothe an oppressed people.

Only she had a new meaning in her life now, and she knew that she would have to share it. She should have done so before, but yesterday had been... so sudden.

“Now you tell me there is to be no rebellion? No magic weapon?”

Kobe’s face looked pained, and she hated to see that.

“One weapon only, as I told you before. We cannot repair it if it fails, and the enemy has many more. And yet this one weapon gives us a chance – a chance to escape.”

“Escape?”

She briefly explained about the *Screaming Kintz*, about Zanele’s studies, about how they were learning to fly the space yacht – all unknown to Tschokke, all unknown to the Arion high command.

“You know that there are other worlds. You know of the Scalantrans, even if you have never seen them. The Arions have no love for them, and they have no love for the Arions. They can help us.”

“How can they help us?”

“They can fight for us. They can help us find others who will fight for us. The Velorians, who are akin to the Arions but have no love for them. Our brethren the *Maleca*. Perhaps even the Galen.”

“These Scalantrans must be far away. Who here knows their comings and goings?”

“I do. Their trading ship is due here in 25 days.”

“How do you know this?”

“They told me at their last trade fair here, before the Arions came. When the Scalantrans tell you something, you can believe it.”

“I believed *you*. About the rebellion.”

“I’m sorry, Kobe – sorrier than I’ve ever been about anything.”

“And now you’ll be going wherever you’re going, and leaving me behind.”

“No, Kobe, I could never leave you behind.”

10

The days dwindled. The time of reckoning drew near.

When Tschokke wasn’t fucking her at his residence, he was talking on the com with his fellow Primes in other villages and on board the Arion cruiser. He paid Zanele no mind at these times, and yet she knew he wanted to impress her with his connections.

What he didn’t know was that she could understand most of what he was saying now. A word that had come up repeatedly – *kuoppa* – she had deduced from context meant “wormhole.” And from further flights with Tschokke, she had become familiar with the way he phrased his commands to the yacht, how the destinations and vectors were coded.

Mbali knew something about that, and she too had been picking up on the language – from Zanele herself. She also knew basic Scalntran, something that had surprised her.

“But how did you think we were going to contact them?” Mbali had asked.

The trade captain and his men would know the Azizi language, of course. But the travel captain and other officers at the helm? She didn’t want to count on that, didn’t want to risk a failure to communicate.

Mbali herself had mended her relationship with Kobe, but it had troubled him that he would be the only one in the village to join them.

“Who should we choose?” she explained. “We cannot take them all. And... can we trust them all?”

“It will go hard with them.”

“Perhaps not, if they know nothing. Which is why they must know nothing.”

“It hurts, just the same.”

“It hurts me, too.”

They had made love then, to overcome the hurt, and they made love again whenever they could – furtively, only beyond the trees beyond the village, where none could see or hear. And even there, they tried to muffle their screams and moans, lest they be found out by some passerby. There was too much at stake.

“Naku penda, Kobe,” she’d say in a low voice when she came.

“Naku penda, Mbali,” he’d say in a low voice when he came, usually at the same time.

One day soon, they hoped, they'd be able to scream their words of love, to scream with joy, to gasp and moan loudly as they fucked, as she sucked his *zubu* until he came, or he licked her *kuma* and nibbled her *kanembe* until she came. And when they weren't doing any of those things, it was so heavenly for them to just hold each other, to feel the warmth of each other's naked bodies.

Kobe had completed work on the cart, and Mbali showed him the hiding place of the GAR. With some effort, they were able to load in onto the cart. Kobe said he knew where to collect some junk to conceal it, and promised to practice hauling the cart, so he'd know how long it would take to bring it into the village on the appointed day.

11

"Let's fly tonight," Zanele told Tschokke that afternoon. "Let's fuck on another world again."

She stroked herself between her legs for emphasis.

Tschokke's eyes lit up.

"Of course," he said. "Any preferences?"

"A cold world this time," she suggested. "Let's melt the eternal ice with our fucking!"

His eyes lit even brighter, if that were possible.

"I'll file a flight plan with Command," he said, and got on the com.

"I told them I might be away for a week," he reported afterwards.

That was the truth. She knew the language now. She also knew it would be the last thing he ever told Command. Zanele excused herself: business with Mbali, she told him. Since it was part of her frequent routine, she did not arouse suspicion.

The village was mostly deserted at this time of the afternoon, the villagers busy with farm work. She set out for Kobe's forge a short distance away, and arrived just in time to see him dragging in a cart, apparently loaded with scrap metal foraged from the site of the old village.

There shouldn't have been that much scrap, and indeed there wasn't – it was just a disguise. Zanele nodded to Kobe with apparent nonchalance, and he began to walk away – leaving the cart behind. She would next see him at the *Screaming Kintz*.

She tipped the cart over with seeming carelessness, casually picked up the GAR, casually returned to Tschokke's residence, casually ascended the steps, and just as casually entered. The Lord Protector was still in what he was pleased to call his office, although in fact he left nearly all the office work to Pimponeous.

When he saw the GAR, he couldn't believe his eyes. He stood there transfixed – then turned to flee. But Zanele had no compunction about shooting him in the back, pursuing him through his quarters. She didn't care what his last thoughts might have been, didn't care whether he'd realized the extent of her hatred or of his own folly. At the end, having brought him down, she didn't even feel triumphant. She was only doing a job that had to be done.

After he gave up his orgone, and his ghost, Zanele played the weapon over Tschokke's remains, obliterating them and creating a large hole in the floor, before the weapon sputtered and died. There was a smell of burned meat lingering in the air.

Then Pimponeous showed up. She'd hoped he was busy with Mbali – Mbali was to have kept him busy -- but apparently he'd thought of something he needed to consult the Lord Protector about.

"Where is..." he began to say as he looked about and sniffed about.

Zanele was about to kill him with one blow, then decided he might be useful to them -- and made it a lighter blow.

PROLOGUE

Zanele paused only to use her heat vision to set a fire back in the village before the people returned from their fields. It would cause enough confusion, she hoped, to help cover their escape. The villagers would flee, and doubtless tell conflicting stories about what had happened.



They could wait no longer to leave. Mbali had calculated that they could make it to the wormhole just in time to meet the *Spirit of Youth*.

“What if they’re not there?” Zanele asked. “What if they’re not on time?”

“The Scalantrans are always on time,” said Mbali.

The *Screaming Kintz* made good time. They were two light-hours out -- halfway to the wormhole -- when it finally dawned on Arion Command that something was amiss and the board sounded with an emergency inquiry.

They dragged Pimponeous to the bridge and forced him to make what they hoped would be an appropriate response. It bought them only moments. Then came a warning shot – a shot that took out the yacht’s main engine, leaving only its momentum and its attitude jets.

To have come so far, to have nearly made it, and then to be defeated and destroyed...

Only, when all seemed lost, there were the Scalantrans. Mbali got on the com to warn them, and it turned out that the traders were ready for combat. As the *Spirit of Youth* let loose and then turned tail, the *Screaming Kintz* was able to make its rendezvous.

“You were right about everything,” Zanele told Mbali, a touch of wonder in her voice.”

“When Mbali tells you something, you can believe it,” affirmed Kobe.

The stories of Zanele, Mbali, Kobe and even Pimponeous are continued in Part

III of *Homecoming* (<http://brightempire.com/Homecoming-3.pdf>).

Note: Tanzrobian septs, in ascending order from normal to supremis, are *akwanza, apiili, atatu, ananu, atano, asita and asaba*. As with many Azizi words, the plurals are formed with an initial m: i.e. *masaba*.