

Second Opinion

By Brantley Thompson Elkins

“They said you needed some company. My name is Rachel.”

She was incredibly beautiful, of course. But that came with the job. Supposed job. So did her outfit: the semi-official uniform of an Adopt pleasure girl.

It was a good enough cover for an Arion defector traveling on a Scalantran ship, he supposed. Jonx hadn't been told the circumstances of her defection, where she came from. He didn't know what Intelligence wanted with her. Or him. He'd simply been asked to “evaluate” her. He was an analyst, not a field agent – and on sabbatical at that.

Something to do with the Compact, he surmised. Nobody was supposed to talk about the Compact, or even to mention it. No hard copies existed beyond Velor itself. The terms were known only to Scalantran factors and ship captains, and entrusted only to their colleagues and successors. And, only in a general way, to Intelligence agents like himself.

Jonx Zal'en knew about the Compact. But he didn't know a thing about Rachel, even though he'd debriefed a few defectors on Erin'lah. It was strange business, being called onto the case this way, and he didn't like strange business.

“You’re not looking at me,” Rachel said, interrupting his train of thought. “You’re supposed to look at me. You’re supposed to want me. I’m a pleasure girl. I love being a pleasure girl.”

No pleasure girl in the universe, or any woman I know, would express herself so awkwardly, Jonx thought. She’s got to be terribly uncomfortable with her imposture. Stands to reason, the way the Empire treats Betas.

She began playing just as awkwardly with her skimpy outfit, evidently intent on showing her breasts.

“You don’t have to go on like that,” he said. “It’s not what this is about.”

“What else would it be about?” she asked, continuing the charade.



“Our real business.”

Rachel seemed disoriented for a moment.

“The room’s shielded,” Jonx assured her. “Nobody can overhear us.”

“I’m not sure why I’m here,” Rachel said, shifting the context of their conversation without a beat. “They told me you could advise them on... whether I’m suitable for the kind of work your agency performs.”

“I don’t know anything about your qualifications and training.”

“Most importantly, I’m a Prime,” she said.

That stunned Jonx. He'd assumed she was a Beta – which, among other things, would have ruled out safe sex between them, he being a Velorian Brava. Betas were second-class citizens in the Empire, often treated little better than conquered peoples. It didn't take much to turn a Beta into a defector – the problem was getting away with it.

But he'd never met a Prime; defections among the ruling class of the Empire were vanishingly rare. The only cases that he'd heard of involved women who had somehow crossed the Emperor or his minions.

Rachel still wasn't sure why she was here? He wasn't sure why *he* was here.

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“Rachel” had been created in a place called the Vault. Nobody on the Scalantran ship knew it. Nobody on the *Hearthstar* was even supposed to know about the Vault. She was the first of her type, a cybernetic brain in a supremis body.

Her predecessors, the Fraul'isets of Vendor, had been the most ingenious robots in the universe, devised to defend their creators' homeworld against the onslaught of the Arion Empire. They had failed, but they had failed valiantly – if such a heroic virtue can be ascribed to robots, however ingenious.

The Empire thought it had destroyed the Vendorians when it destroyed their world, driven by the momentum of its own fury against an alien race that had sided with the Velorian Enlightenment in the War of the Supremis. The Empire was wrong, and the Enlightenment didn't want it to learn that it was wrong. It wanted the Empire to forget.

Now a fugitive people, the Vendorians themselves could never forget. Their gypsy fleet continued to produce warships and weapons for Velor and its allies, shipped by

circuitous routes. But they wanted to strike back at the Empire directly. They broached their proposal with Velor's secret ambassador to their secret fleet.

The ambassador had been positively shocked. So had the Ministry of Science, to which the proposal had been addressed, as soon as it decrypted his message. The decrypted text had been destroyed, and the few who had seen it were sworn to secrecy.

"Sacrilege!" the High Minister of Science had cried.

But he couldn't forget. Neither could the others who had seen it, even though they managed to keep it from the Senate and the Prime Minister. They shared it only with the Ministry of Defense, which had jurisdiction over Intelligence and was still smarting over the destruction of Belside. Surely better intelligence could have prevented that disaster, and brought the world and its scientific expertise into the Enlightenment.

The ministries agreed in secret to study the Vendorian proposal, without committing themselves in any way. The study, purely hypothetical, was assigned to Laboratory W on Daxxan, which was out of sight and usually out of mind to other ministries. If it ever came into sight or mind, regardless, it vanished and then reappeared at a new and more secret location.

Laboratory W was an empire unto itself. It was there that the Ministry of Science had bred the Sara'yen, the Enlightenment's answer to the Tset'lars. Deadly, yet still with living brains and living souls, however tortured. But a new generation of fraul'isets, with supremis bodies and cybernetic brains?

Never!

Only, never say never. The temptation was too great, the stakes too high. The work couldn't be done in the home system, of course, even at Laboratory W. But a team of Velorian genetic engineers – all males, in keeping with the prevailing prejudice against women in professions, notwithstanding the exalted role of Protectors in Velor's image as well as its defense – got a one-way ticket to the Vault to collaborate with Vendorian roboticists on the research and development.

It took decades. Interfacing flesh and machine was a daunting challenge, and until the cloned bodies had been grown out the technology was purely theoretical – it still had to be tested and refined and tested again until it proved out.

Yet at last, the prototype was ready. The Vendorian roboticists were satisfied. So were the Velorian geneticists. Their coded reports to Velor, borne by Messengers who knew nothing of their contents or of the project, were glowing. The perfect field agent: she could infiltrate the Empire and, like a tourist soaking up the sun on a tropical planet, soak up and instantly decrypt all the electronic military and political traffic. And nobody would ever suspect; she'd be just a visitor from a distant corner of the realm, taking in the sights and expressing awe at the majesty of Aria.

Still, the distant Ministry of Defense, mindful of the pitfalls of groupthink, wanted a second opinion. Security being so tight, that second opinion must be not only unbiased but unknowing. It was a matter of arranging an encounter, of having Rachel placed by seeming coincidence on the same ship as the agent. The encounter must seem a spur-of-the-moment improvisation – a matter of convenience, not design.

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“You’d better begin at the beginning,” Jonx prompted her

“My true name is Erzhebet Malatar. I was born on Bharat-orzag. My parents were Pal Malatar, the planetary governor, and Inga Koydi. I had a happy childhood, until my 16th birthday. That was when my father was replaced. It had nothing to do with his performance. The Emperor needed to find a sinecure for a member of the extended royal family who had fallen out of favor with the Court, but might one day regain favor and therefore could not simply be eliminated....”

Bharat-orzag. Towards the opposite end of the Empire from Enlightenment space, Jonx mused. *This could be really valuable.*

Erzhebet laid out her story in fine detail, and her delivery was impeccable. None of the ums and ahs that pepper casual conversation. The story itself seemed almost too good to be true: when she was a child, her father had taught her how to encrypt and decrypt messages, let her tour visiting Imperial warships and even Scalantran traders. She had struck up a friendship with a Scalantran trade captain and his mate group, and they had told her about all the worlds they’d seen – on both sides of the line.

“When they deposed my father, I was afraid he’d be taken away, that we’d all be taken away. I didn’t want to go away. The next time the Scalantran ship came by, I went on board to see my friends. Everybody was used to that by then. But I waited until just a couple of hours before departure time, so nobody noticed when I didn’t come back.”

“Weren’t you taking a big risk?”

“I wanted to see the Enlightenment. They’d told me all about the Enlightenment. How free people were there, and how good the Velorians were.”

“But weren’t you putting your family at risk?”

“They would have wanted this,” Erzhebet said calmly. “They wanted me to be free.”

She went on about that. It sounded too pat, like a cross between a propaganda vid and a tourist commercial. Moreover, it was hard to get any more details out of her. She wasn’t allowed to identify the ship and the trading captain – out of concern for their safety, she insisted. That could well be true, but...

“What worlds had they told you about?”

“Velor, of course. Selene. Cipangu. Andros. Tazzi’s World. All wonderful places, so they told me. And I heard about the neutral worlds, too. About Belside. That was a great tragedy.”

A great tragedy, indeed, and yet she talked about it as if she were talking about the weather. Further questioning, moreover, revealed that she had only vague knowledge of those “wonderful” worlds – no more than could have been picked up at a data terminal anywhere.

Jonx was just as frustrated when he tried to elicit any intimate details of her life – not her sex life, just her *life*. She had once played Scrumbles, she told him. It was fun. Period. She’d been a forward, and she knew the rules forwards and backwards. But she couldn’t seem to remember any particular game, or any particularly exciting play.

“It was a long time ago,” she’d say, or “That’s not important any more.”

It was the same with literature and music and art. She professed to have little or no interest in them, and showed no awareness that people could be moved by them, that they could change people’s lives.

It was at this point that Jonx came to the reluctant conclusion that Erzhebet must be suffering from some sort of brain damage or disability. Only, that didn't make any sense. Primes were invulnerable; they couldn't be killed or damaged except by the most powerful weapons. Or, if they were warriors, in sexual combat.

Could she have been damaged in combat, and suffered partial amnesia and other effects from that? When he tried to raise the possibility in a very oblique manner, fearful that he might touch a raw nerve, bring back some forgotten trauma, her reaction was totally unexpected – and even alarming.

“I am extremely skilled at sexual combat,” Erzhebet told him. “By your leave, I am prepared to give a demonstration.”

With that, she shucked off the pleasure girl outfit. Her body was impressive – but then, so was that of any Prime. Her breasts were pert, but smaller than average for a supremis: could she be in a state of orgone depletion; could that explain her strange behavior?

“That's hardly necessary,” Jonx said, almost stammering as he considered the possibility that sex with her might be too much of a...

“Please undress,” she bid him.

Sex wasn't normally part of the protocol for evaluation interviews, but neither was it strictly forbidden and, under the circumstances, it might be appropriate. It might reveal something about her potential as well as her body and its performance. It might also be an offer he couldn't refuse, Jonx rationalized as he undressed.

He was already hard, which was indeed appropriate – given her beauty and the fact that her pheromones were assaulting his nostrils. What didn't seem appropriate, even under the circumstances, was her approach.

“You'll observe that I am already wet,” she said, as she impaled herself on his cock. “I can become wet at a moment's notice.”

Indeed, her juices were not only bathing his cock, but dripping around it.

“I can also become tight at a moment's notice,” she continued, clamping down on him. “And I am superlative at riding a man.”

Why is she turning this into a lecture? Jonx wondered briefly. But he quickly got into the rhythm of their fucking as she slammed herself against him again and again, as he grabbed her provoking breasts and mauled them savagely. That seemed to encourage her; she began pounding him all the harder.

He screamed with delight as he came deep inside her, and he could feel her cunt shudder with her own release. And yet her expression never changed; neither did her tone of voice.

“I can feel you semen shooting into me,” she remarked as he came. “If you were an enemy Prime, I could drain your orgone within minutes. You would be helpless. I think I have made my point.”

And with that, Erzhebet *stopped*. Stopped dead. She rose to her feet, and his still erect cock popped out.

Jonx was speechless as he came down from coming and wanting to come again.

“Have I sufficiently demonstrated my combat skills?” Erzhebet asked.

Jonx could only nod, but she didn't seem to react to that, because she asked again.

"Persuasively," he said this time, observing in passing that her breasts were a little bigger now.

*She could be dangerous, he thought. And not only to Arions. There's something seriously **wrong** with her.*

"I think you'll agree that I am highly qualified to become a field agent for Velorian Intelligence."

"I shall deliver my report to the Ministry without delay," he promised, just to be on the safe side. So much for his sabbatical travel plans! He'd have to catch the next ship back to Velor when the *Hearthstar* reached Tarot's World.

Erzhebet slipped her outfit back on, and slipped out the door.

Some forgotten bit of information had been worrying him at the back of his mind, and now he remembered what it was: a mental condition among Terrans he'd once read about, a syndrome characterized by social and emotional disconnect and obsessive-compulsive behavior. It had a number of names; but the most common, popularized by a world called MacMorrow-Yakovsky but dating back to old Earth times, was *apsychia*.

Only, how could this be, in a Prime? Jonx realized that he still had no idea when or where Erzhebet had boarded, had nothing but her word for her obscure planet of origin. He knew only that he had been approached by the station chief at Corridor, the last port of call, about the assignment. The Scalantrans would know, but he wasn't about to bother them about it – not that they'd tell him a thing; he was just a desk jockey back at HQ, not cleared at anywhere near the highest level.

He'd wanted to see other worlds. That much he had in common with Erzhebet – assuming she was to be believed. Now, except for brief glimpses, he'd just be seeing the inside of a ship for months on end. At least he'd have ordinary Terrans for company – passengers and crew.

Adopts served as interfaces with passengers while the Scalantrans kept discreetly out of sight while attending to their duties on the bridge, in the engine room and in the cargo bays. Humans knew, but didn't like to be reminded, that interstellar commerce depended on the Big Red Aliens. Neither did Jonx. Protectors and Messengers and Gatekeepers could soar from star to star on their own. People like himself might as well be frails, traveling only within hulls of Vendorian steel.

His report had long been completed before he reached Velor. The evaluation was headed: "Definitely sub-Prime." It went into exhaustive, mostly theoretical detail.

Let the service make of it what they will, he thought.

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Jonx never learned what an uproar his report caused. The High Minister of Defense called the High Minister of Science and gave him holy hell.

"How could your people at the Vault ever have approved such a faulty design?" he thundered. "If this weren't beyond top secret, your boys from Laboratory W would be the laughing stock of the planet."

The High Minister of Science hemmed and hawed, and finally couldn't think of any explanation beyond the fact that the Velorian geneticists were too isolated for their own

good. The only Velorian women serving there at that time were Protectors, and they were off limits – for more reasons than one.

“They seem to have forgotten what a real woman is like, getting by with sex dolls,” the High Minister of Defense opined. “We really need to implement a stimulus package. Find some women who are turned on by geneticists and send them out there ASAP. And I don’t want to hear any more excuses. This project must not, *must* not fail.”

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They're still out there, those Velorian geneticists, working on the same basic model, but using Velorian women as their benchmarks for programming – among other things. Not only that, but the women are studying up on genetics – something unheard of back on Velor – and making their own contributions to the project.

Velorian authorities would be shocked by that, but nobody's going to tell them.

Before long now, their improved Second Variety fraul'isets are going be harvesting secrets from deep within the Arion Empire. As for the prototype, she's been retired and will never be deployed. Neither will any other artificial agent with the same specs. That's their story, anyway, and they're sticking to it.