

Ordinary Velorians

Corridor

By Shadar, edited by Brantley

Chapter One

Erg'nomics Shop #3, Sera'phim, Velor

Vera Sho'tovic's vidphone beeped as she sat at her workbench, patiently reassembling the liquid sodium control valve that she'd just overhauled. She ignored it, hoping it would quit ringing. Instead, the ring took on the tone that said "urgent." Sighing, she paused to look down at her grease-covered hands, and resorted to jabbing her elbow against the glowing Answer button on the screen. "I'm busy, god damn it!"

"We've got a situation, Sho'tovic," a calm, male voice replied.

Her heart sank as she recognized the Director's voice. She'd been dragged into HR only last week and nearly fired. It was no secret that the Director was out to get her.

"We have a runaway Breeder," he continued when she didn't reply. "A really early model. Kalark'sen says you once volunteered for an off-planet assignment. You still interested?"

Vera's heart leaped, but she tried to keep the sudden excitement out of her voice. She'd dreamed of getting off-planet for years. "Who the hell do I have to kill?"

"With any luck, you'll be saving lives," the Director continued, his voice so sweet it made her stomach turn. "I need someone on Corridor right away. Their Model 7 is out of control due to a cooling system malfunction. Nine-thousand rads in the containment dome after it breached, and that's rising fast. Reactor vessel itself may have fractured, and the containment won't hold forever."

Vera rubbed a clean spot of her forearm across her nose to suppress a sneeze. Pump grease always made her itch. "O.K. I'll bite. What the fuck is a Corridor?"

"Mining colony – it's an inside-out asteroid near Klaxton 2."

"Hard rock miners, huh?"

"That's what the SitRep says."

"Fucking A, I'll go. Be nice to deal with some no bullshit types for a change," she said, the last only half under her breath. She'd made a reputation of sorts for herself by confronting management during a recent series of cost-cutting moves. She'd spoken up in an employee meeting, and the discussion had ended with her shouting about "techno-political bullshit" and "fat cat management." Also something about "ossification." She'd heard that word and thought it sounded cool. Erg'nomics management might as well be petrified it was so slow moving.

The mess had started when the Director tried to reduce their benefits and outsource some of their jobs. Vera took them on, and her union, the forbund, had backed her all the way. She'd surprised herself by winning that first round, but knew better than to think management was going to give up on the outsourcing. She'd been waiting for the other shoe to drop for the last few weeks.

"So what's in it for me?" she asked in a stronger voice. Her sentences were clipped, her words sharp. She smelled a rat. If not for her good work record and the forbund, she'd already be out on the street. The forbund steward had told her to lay low for a while.

"This is your dream shot. I'm offering you a short-term off-planet assignment. Extremely dangerous, but pay's good. Overtime all the way there and back."

"Dangerous?"

"As I said, they've got a heavy radiation leak. Asteroid's at the fringe of Enlightenment space, so I can't guarantee your safety. But out there, the rads shouldn't hurt you much."

"How's that?"

"No gold anywhere near Corridor."

Vera's heart leaped. She was being offered a job outside a gold field? Impossible! Nobody but Protectors, Messengers and diplomatic and military types ever got that privilege. The words spilled from her mouth before she could even think. "I'm in, I'm in!"

A hint of sarcasm teased the edge of his voice as he said, "We appreciate your volunteering."

Vera's thoughts were swirling so fast she never heard him. Everybody knew what happened to a Velorian outside a gold field. Fantastic strength. Invulnerability. The power of flight! Less than one in ten thousand Velorians were allowed to live outside a gold field, and it was unheard of for one of her genetic class. That gave her pause. First rule of preservation: if something seems too good to be true, it is. She was the last person the Director should have been giving this assignment to.

"So why me?" she asked as she dropped the half assembled valve on the bench and began to wipe the grease from her hands. "You probably got nuke techs and engineers who'd love to go."

"None of them can work on an early model breeder. Just you and your boss. And he's too old to go off-planet."

"Well, yeah, since they're all in museums." Vera was a maintenance tech at the Velorian Energy Museum. "Model 7 you said? That can't be. They were all ordered decommissioned."

"There's obviously one still working, or we wouldn't be talking," the Director said smugly. "Grab some clothes and report to Landing Pad 83. A Diplomatic courier ship will be waiting. But make it snappy. Those miners out there are living on borrowed time."

"A courier ship?" Vera gasped, even more astounded now. Only top government officials got to fly in those ships. They could cover vast distances faster than even a Protector could. "Who did you say I gotta kill again?"

"You're going out there to save lives. The situation is critical. You're going to do very heavy G's all the way there, and even then, you'll barely arrive in time."

"And if I'm not? In time I mean."

"Then you get a quick round trip out and back to a burned-out cinder. Won't be anything left to salvage."

Vera cringed, deciding not to ask what would happen if she got there and then the reactor blew. She suddenly realized why the Director had chosen her. She was willing to bet that the timing was even tighter than the Director said, and she was definitely expendable. He gets paid a fortune to fly someone out, and he solves his personnel problem to boot. The miners were going to fry anyway.

She pushed those fears away and took off at a run, keying the Taxi Call button on her PersComp. She was willing to risk it. There were other places she could go once she got away from this accursed planet.

Like most lower-class Vels, Vera had dreamed of getting off-planet ever since she'd been a girl, but she hadn't had the faintest prospect of doing that until now. She was just a simple maintenance tech, B-class at that. Lowest of the low. She worked as a reactor valve and pump technician for Erg'nomics, the leading energy producer on Velor. They donated some time and money to running the Energy Museum, where she worked, repairing stuff that should have been scrapped ages ago. She figured that Erg'nomics ran the museum just for image – and maybe a tax break.

She'd had the same job ever since she'd finished Tech school twelve years ago. Prior to that, she'd dropped out of her A-level studies at the age of fifteen, and hooked up with an older boyfriend who hung out with a gang of freedlings – outlaws who mocked Skietra, engaged in fixing Scrumbles matches, ran the black market, and used illegal stimulants to enhance their sexual performance to P levels. She'd enjoyed it for a while, even the gang sex.

But one of the freedlings her boyfriend had rubbed the wrong way somehow got hold of a layer sword and murdered him out of pure spite – then wouldn't take no for an answer when he came on to her. Only she'd read up on illegal hormones, and killed him in turn by exploiting the sexual stimulants that were still in his veins. She pushed his sexual frenzy to such a peak that his heart exploded. She'd also found the layer sword and destroyed it – if the authorities had found out she even knew about such a thing, they might have used it lawfully on her...

That horrific day had also happened to be her sixteenth birthday, the day Protectors enjoy their glorious Rites.

Vera's coming of age was far uglier.

The police report depicted her as a victim who "got lucky" when the perpetrator suffered a massive heart attack. She knew luck hadn't had a damn thing to do with it. Determination had. So had skill. Even at that tender age, she was a survivor.

Instead of going back to her parents and their offers of "spiritual healing," for they were worshippers of Skietra, she used ill-begotten money from her boyfriend to earn herself an A-level diploma and enter a training program for technicians. She wasn't book smart, but she'd always been savvy about machines and her boyfriend had taught her how to fix a flitter-bike -- after a time she could fix it even better than he could.

She quickly infuriated her teachers at the school, most of them engineers, by finding ways to fix things in ways that weren't in the book. She loved working on ancient machinery that everyone else wanted to toss in the trash, and she graduated with the highest score in her class in Lab, and the lowest possible passing score in Theory.

After Tech school, she started working odd jobs around the fringes of the nuclear power industry until Erg'nomics finally hired her to work at the Museum. Her job was to restore obsolete power systems to working order. The museum's claim to fame was that every exhibit was part of a working system, and she took great pride in contributing her own little bit of power into the planetary grid.

Life was pretty good after that. Good but boring. She missed hanging out with the gang. She missed the bawdy sex with Velorians as alienated as herself, sharing her warmth and her youth as well with the older B-class Velorian whose lives had gone nowhere. But she was making a decent living doing what she wanted, and she liked her boss. He was an aging

engineer who'd actually worked on breeder reactors when they were part of the power grid, a hundred years earlier.

After his wife died, Vera moved in with him. The sex wasn't all that great, so she started sitting up most of the night studying his engineering manuals as he slept away in the bedroom. She came to love those dangerous, old breeder reactors.

But as the years passed, Vera knew she wanted more from life than comfort and security. She spent many nights lying on the grass and staring up at the stars, dreaming of getting away from the strangling effects of Big Government and the corporations that sucked the life out of people like herself. Away from older men who could barely ignite the flames of passion she so enjoyed. She wanted to escape Velor and find a frontier where her well-honed survival skills and cleverness would be useful.

It was a common enough dream for the disenfranchised in any culture, but it was particularly acute among the B-class Velorians. Living on the lowest rung of Velorian society, everything controlled and calibrated and ordered, not to mention limited, she dreamed of the superwoman she'd become if only she could escape the gold field of Velor. She fell asleep dreaming about the Terrans putting her on a pedestal, and worshipping her as a goddess.

Of course, she couldn't share that dream with anyone else, or they'd never let her go off-planet. The Velorian government was paranoid about renegades, especially Velorians who pretended they were angels or gods. Too many Velorians had refused to return to Velor after leaving it.

The Council tolerated their vaunted Protectors, even when they broke the rules, for their job was dangerous enough and they were bred with an instinctive desire to help the less powerful. But ordinary Velorians like herself were as diverse morally and emotionally as Terrans. That meant that some of them would become megalomaniacs if released among Terrans. There were enough messy case histories in the archives to prove their point.

Vera's boss was the only person she'd ever hinted to about going off-planet, and he sometimes stayed up late at night talking about the old reactors which were rumored to still be in production along the fringes of the Enlightenment. No engineer trained in the last hundred years knew anything about maintaining them. Everything was either antimatter or fusion powered now.

More years passed, years during which Protectors continued to go off planet to save worlds, and those beautiful Messengers followed. Girls like her with dirty blonde hair and grease under her fingernails and low-class genes and fake credentials were lucky to have a job as the Velorian economy worsened from the effects of the long war, let alone win an off-planet assignment.

Until now.

Vera sat back in the taxi's seat and fantasized for the thousandth time what it might be like to launch out of the planetary gold field of Velor. It had to be the ultimate physical rush. Yet nobody who'd gone off-planet was willing to talk about it. The government had classified everything a Protector or Messenger did as a State Secret. The only stories that she'd found were buried in obituary notices, and the occasional commendation for extraordinary bravery. Those accounts were amazing enough, talking of the young women of Velor fighting Aurean starships with little more than their bare hands and blazing eyes.

Everyone knew that Aurean starships were equipped with HGARs and fusion torpedoes. It was inconceivable that pretty bare skin and feminine muscles could defeat such a machine! Of course, there were always the soap operas on the holo, many of them depicting life on

Terran worlds, but nobody believed for a second that those syrupy sagas had anything to do with reality. The government would never allow that.

She keyed in a search on the name Corridor, but the databank in her PersComp didn't have any information. She reluctantly spent the dwindling credit in her bank account to connect to the Central Database and search its archives. She quickly learned that Corridor was an asteroid, 45 kilometers by 30, in an elongated orbit around a class J sun, period fifteen-hundred years. During the last twenty years of the orbit, just before it raced through the inner planets to kiss the sun, the asteroid was cool enough for Terrans to live inside and mine. The Mining Guild had staked a claim, and miners had gone to work hollowing out living quarters in the core. They were in a race to extract all the ore before their home became uninhabitable for the next fifteen centuries.

It was this elliptical orbit and the resulting heating/cooling cycle which made Corridor such a treasure-trove of metals. A million cycles around the sun had done most of the hard work of separating metal from rock, and the miners just had to dig out the nearly pure ore. Nearly every metal in the periodic table was there in large quantities. Everything except gold, which was useless to Velorians in any case.

The data bank pictures revealed an oblong rock covered with thousands of impact craters. In sharp contrast, the photos taken inside the asteroid showed a village located in a central cavern. Extensive use of holographics created an illusion of living in an expansive green jungle, with waterfalls and volcanic mountains visible in the distance. In reality the cavern was a mere kilometer long by half that wide, and wrapped in an artificial gravity field. Five hundred miners and their families lived there, with another hundred storekeepers and their families supporting them.

Total population under two thousand. Other than a Velorian consulate officer who visited every six months to handle a few interstellar visas and passports, other legal forms like marriage certificates were left to the locals. Vera suspected that was exactly how the miners liked it. They were a notoriously independent bunch, the data bank said.

She punched the Hold button on the dash of her taxi as it reached Zaver'el Street, and ran into her basement apartment to grab a change of clothing. She paused in the bathroom to gather up the usual toiletries, only to laugh when she remembered that she'd be out of a gold field. She wouldn't need as much as a toothbrush. She was going to become a goddess.

The taxi deposited her at the spaceport an hour later. Slinging her bag over her shoulder, she stepped onto a moving walkway that wound its way between the widely-spaced launch pads. She passed a dozen cargo ships with their bulbous holds, steam rising from liquefied gases and decontamination systems, before she found the sleek courier ship being prepped on Pad 83. It was made of silver metal, polished to mirror brightness, its frame long and slender, the engines in the rear looking oversized and muscular given the size of the ship. Her PersComp had said courier ships were capable of 30G's continuous acceleration/deceleration for weeks at a time, and they had limited gravitational dampers. All the ship's power went to the engines; so only an empowered Supremis could survive the heavy acceleration, not to mention the brief pull of hundreds of G's during a hole transit.

Vera settled eagerly into the hard metal seat, surprised to find that she was the only passenger on-board. The Captain, an aging M-class, came back to explain that she'd have to be hooked up to a forced breathing system that would deliver sleepy gas before the ship left Velor. When she objected, saying she wanted to watch the stars and colors during the hole transit, he impatiently explained how an inexperienced and hyper-strong passenger wandering

around his starship wasn't healthy for anyone – a simple moment of exuberance or a forgotten moment, not to mention an attempt to levitate, and his pretty ship could get broken. He said it would be up to the locals on the far end of the transit to deal with her empowerment.

“Couldn’t you just let me wear gold, at least when we get there?” she asked.

“Not my call,” he said. “I’ve got my orders. They don’t want you mixing with the P Class passengers who already know how to behave aboard ship and don’t need gold to keep them in line. Anyway, it’s got to be the gas for you on the way, because if you were wearing gold, you might not stand the acceleration, and they want you there in one piece to do... whatever it is they want you to do.”

The captain left it to some tech to actually hook her up, instead of just talk about it.

Vera sighed and took a deep breath, inhaling the minty-smelling gas, knowing as she did that this was the only way she was going to get off-planet. Her eyes grew heavy and her world turned black.

She had only her bright dreams to sustain her now.

Chapter Two

Space Port, the mining asteroid Corridor

Seemingly only moments later, Vera woke to find herself staring up at a ceiling that was not of metal, but of roughly-hewn stone ceiling. She was all alone.

Corridor.

She’d hoped to wake up on the ship, under gold, to watch the final approach to Corridor. Surely the captain could have allowed that. But she’d just been dumped here. There wasn’t even anybody to meet her. *They must have done the paperwork while I was still under*, she thought. *Hell of a way to do business. Like I was just cargo instead of a person.* She looked about the room where she had awakened.

It had clearly been shaped by explosives, not by particle beams or lasers -- a primitive but very cheap way to move rock. She narrowed her eyes and looked closer, yet instead of coming into sharper focus, she suddenly found herself staring through the ceiling and out into a long, narrow cavern full of plants with brilliant lights overhead. She turned her head, and all around her, the rock walls faded until it appeared she was lying in a glass bowl.

It was only then that she realized that her dream was coming true. She hadn’t dreamed under the gas; the captain hadn’t said anything about that, let alone whether there was any reason for it – but that didn’t matter now.

Smiling insanely, she zoomed her eyes in to see people going about their business in their homes and offices, unaware that she was looking over their shoulders. She looked into bedrooms, finding herself an accidental voyeur. Of a sudden, she stood up, and found herself hitting the ceiling, knocking down chips of rock. It took several tries before she managed to get some control of herself, even without trying to walk. She stood there for a while, gazing at the people outside – they were repulsive, to say the least. The Vels who played them in holo dramas couldn’t be made to look *that* bad.

Then Vera looked down at herself, only to be shocked to find that her breasts were riding so high that they looked inflated. That amused her, for she’d never been considered well-endowed on Velor. She made a fist and looked at the hard tendons shaping her wrist and the back of her hand, finding that her biceps bulged even larger than usual.



When she tried to walk, her first step sent her in to the ceiling again. It was one thing to intellectually understand Velorian strength, and another thing entirely to retune her reflexes for an effective body weight of less than 0.20 kilo. She wasn't really lighter, but her legs were vastly stronger.

She finally managed a shuffling walk that allowed her to float just above the floor, her toes touching down every meter or so. She gingerly opened the door at the far side of the room, only to find to her chagrin that the plastic handle crumbled in her too-strong grip. It felt like spun sugar candy. Closing the door gently behind her, she tried to imagine that the entire asteroid was made of glass, and that she was a helium balloon, bouncing weightlessly along.

She'd started to get the hang of channeling her natural reflexes through those mental models by the time she exited the Customs building, and found herself in a narrow lane with shops on both sides. Rough looking miners in their work suits and shopkeepers in their jerseys were walking around, all of them men, but none much to look at. They stared at her as they moved silently out of her path, their eyes watching her floating feet at first, and then rising to her chest. Very few of them reached all the way to her eyes. And none of them greeted her. Were they supposed to ignore Velorians?

But she was distracted by her own reactions to her new world. Every exertion seemed to send a riot of delightful tingles coursing through her body, the pleasant sensations growing stronger the more she exerted herself. She experimented by pouring all her strength into her arm, and her chest flared hot from the sudden rush of orgone metabolism, her nipples growing hard as they began to tingle wildly. The paired sensations of burdening strength and tingling arousal began to feed on each other, so much so that the sweat on her skin began to steam. Gasping for air, she was astounded to feel herself racing upward in a spiraling swirl of desire, her nipples burning with a naughty mixture of pain/pleasure as she pressed her elbows into her sides, expanding her powerful pectoral muscles to lift her breasts even higher.

Vera gulped for air as the unmistakable rush of an approaching orgasm enveloping her in its delicious warmth. Smiling at the pure, hedonistic pleasure of being outside a gold field, she gently pulsed the muscles of her pelvic floor to excite herself further, then slowly arched her back and let the orgasmic rush overtake her. She wasn't sure how a Velorian should behave outside a gold field, but there was little doubt that having sex with herself in public would be crossing the line on any human world. Yet it was so damn easy to get turned on here outside a gold field!

Basking in the glow of the still smoldering rush, and strangely enjoying the startled looks she was getting from the humans, she walked proudly down the alleyway, her movements as smooth as a jungle cat now, her posture perfect, her blue eyes reflecting the admiration she saw in everyone's face. She imagined she was a goddess in their eyes. A goddess who should have been wearing a shimmering, translucent gown made of spun silver and jewels.

That dream didn't last long, for she was quickly sobered by the realization that she wore her usual outfit; faded jeans and a simple black top. A top that left her strong shoulders, arms and midriff bare, the best parts of her body in her opinion, but hardly appropriate for being an ambassador from Velor on a distant world. Even worse, instead of a goddess' flowing platinum blonde hair, her dirty blonde hair was tied back into a loose ponytail and she wore a simple pendant her aunt had once given her for good luck.

The first flight of stairs humbled her further. She tripped and fell, her nose banging off every metal step before she crumpled into a heap at the bottom. She got back to her feet feeling sheepish, grateful that no one had witnessed her stupidity. Amazingly, it hadn't hurt.

The next flight of steps went better. She pushed more firmly off the top step, and found she was able to float down the staircase, but not without flailing her arms and kicking her legs to land on her feet at the bottom. Pleased by her landing, even if she was flopping around like a fish out of water, she started to walk more confidently.

She gave the next staircase the respect it deserved, and managed to reach a wide corridor without further incidents. The sign on a building wall proclaimed it as Central. She was astounded to see the corridor walls converging in the distance. It apparently ran the entire kilometer-long length of the living spaces.

Satisfied that this was the most likely place for people to find her, she leaned up against the wall near the window of a shop, resting her hand casually on her hip as she tried to look calm and confident. Sure enough, a contingent of humans appeared to march straight toward her. They must be the people in charge, but they didn't look any more impressive than those she had already encountered. Not because of the varied colors of their hair and eyes and short stature, or even the pasty color of their skin. What shocked her was the way their muscles hung off their bodies, limp and unexercised. It was one thing to be phenomenally weak and a fragile, everyone knew that about Terran-normal humans, but these Terrans made no attempt to take care of their bodies. They were just ugly, there was no other way to describe them. Now she knew why she'd heard them called "frails."

A man of medium height, several inches below her own 6'2", identified himself as Mayor Maczarz. His body was rounded and soft, his eyes bloodshot.

"Vera Sho'tovic of Velor, we welcome you to Corrididor," he said formally.

"Finally, somebody who'll speak to me."

"Hardly anyone speaks Velorian. They don't need to. But we do. We took deepteach."

He offered his hand, and Vera started to take it, but the mayor took one look at her own sinewy hand and jerked his back. Startled, it took her a moment to realize why. He was afraid of her. "Good thinking," she remarked with a shrug, confirming his fears. "I probably don't know my own strength yet."

"We have some gold if that will help," the short, mousy-looking man next to him offered hopefully, his eyes following her every movement.

"I think you'd better just show me the reactor," Vera replied, glaring down at him. "I'm going to need these muscles that you seem to like so much."

The mayor's flunky quickly looked away and started to cough.

Maczarz rolled his eyes at him before giving Vera his own quick once over. "I have to say, I've never heard of a Velorian with tattoos. I didn't think that was even possible."

"You like them?" Vera teased him as she lifted her top slightly to reveal the flat expanse of her abs. The colored curves of an elaborate tattoo of vines rose to spread outward to embrace the lower curve of her breasts. "You have no idea how hard it was to get these done."

The mayor stared awkwardly at her scanty dress, obviously marveling at her flawless skin as much as he did her tattoos. If he'd seen images of Velorian women before, or even met them, they were nothing like her.

He must have pushed that thought away, for he quickly blinked his eyes and came back to the urgency of the moment. "Our people haven't been able to repair the reactor since the inner vessel cracked. We're ready to evacuate in under 12 hours if you tell us you can't fix it."

"Who's been working on it?" Vera asked as she followed the mayor toward a small flitter that was parked along one side of Central. She was grateful to sit and not embarrass herself further by trying to walk, let alone fly.

"Our two power engineers. Alex Cordon and Calen Donaldson," Maczarz said, pointing toward two men who were standing on the other side of the narrow lane.

The men's apparent ages and mannerisms suggested to Vera that they were recently graduated engineers. She'd dealt with more than her share of whiz kids over the years, but had no respect for them unless they were willing to ask questions and learn. Most young engineers thought they knew it all until something went horribly wrong.

"We hired them out of the university on Kelsor 7," the mayor confirmed as he lowered his voice and leaned closer to her. "Unfortunately, we got our signals crossed and their major area of study was fusion systems, not breeders. Nobody studies those any more, it turns out. But they're good kids... they've been reading the old manuals on this reactor since they came, trying to figure it out, working day and night."

Vera frowned, realizing how impossible it was to repair these old reactors based on book learning alone. Maczarz saw the look in her eye and shrugged. "No other power engineers would sign on here, and the old hands who know breeders are long retired. Not exactly a paradise out here."

So you hired two wet behind the ears kids, Vera thought to herself. Then she considered her own situation and smiled. Outside of her self-taught skills in fixing these old reactors, her brag sheet looked terrible. But nobody else on Velor was willing to fly out here to save a shit-hole like this. Other than a Protector, and what did warriors know about nukes, other than maybe making them blow up? Anyway, they had other duties...

The engineers walked over to introduce themselves, trying to act confident, but their darting looks gave away their nervousness. Vera was several inches taller than they were and she was Velorian and she was both muscular and tough looking -- definitely not the kind of woman these boys would hang out with. Assuming they even knew any women. The more assertive of the two, Alex, tried to disguise his insecurity by rapidly briefing her on the reactor operating condition. He dumped a torrent of technical information on thermal performance and radiation profiles in her lap, clearly trying to impress her.

Vera didn't understand most of it, but the gist wasn't hard to follow. The reactor was in terrible shape. Beyond being ancient technology, it had been poorly maintained, and now it had suffered a cascading series of major breakdowns.

The other engineer, Calen, joined in, trying to be helpful by going over the list of breakdowns. His list went on and on until Vera finally threw up her hands.

"Why the hell are you guys even operating this piece of junk?" she interrupted, horrified by what she was hearing. "Your reactor's past merely being dangerous. It's a Model 7, for Skietra's sake. Even properly maintained, they're bombs ready to go off any moment."

"Budgets," Calen shrugged. "This whole asteroid is going to melt down again in a decade or so, so the Miners Guild didn't want to install anything valuable. An anti-matter plant would take a hundred years to amortize, and a fusion one fifty years. We needed something cheap that we could just leave behind."

"But where'd you guys find this piece of junk? I've never heard of anything earlier than a model 10 that's still running."

Alex glared at her, clearly uncomfortable with having a technician demanding answers. "Our GM got it from the Scalantrans, who must have got it second-hand from some Seeded World. Still and all, we've done pretty good with it here."

"But why a Model 7? They're supposed to be banned on populated planets; I've heard every damn one of them has either melted down or blown up."

"Hey, we weren't even hired yet when they installed it," Alex said defensively. "And Corridor isn't technically an independent world, just a province of Klaxton 2, which is where most of the Miners come from. Even planetary laws mostly aren't enforced here. The Guild makes the rules."

"That's no excuse for stupidity."

"When we were hired, we didn't know what a Model 7 was," Calen admitted sheepishly. "And after we got here, with our transport costs indentured for two years, we figured, what the hell, we'd make it work."

Alex jumped in. "And who cares what shape it's in at the end. This whole rock is going to melt down."

"So you turkeys wind up with a vessel breach and 9,000 rads in the dome." She tapped her forehead. "What university did you graduate from again?"

"Hey, nobody could have prevented that," Alex snarled. "The stress cracking was sudden, and now we've got a significant criticality starting to build in the contaminated sludge that's coating the floor of the containment dome. It's collecting in the low points."

"Right," Calen continued, waving his hands as he talked. "The dirty reaction on the containment floor is producing more radiation than heat. It's way too hot for us to get in to fix it, even wearing shielded armor."

"Well, this is one total fucking mess," Vera sighed. "And I'm supposed to make it all better? All by myself?"

"We'll help any way we can," Calen said. "But they said you were a breeder expert."

"They?"

"The Erg'nomics staff. We read their report while we were waiting for you to come off the trunk. You're the best Velor has, or so they said."

Vera sighed, knowing now that her Director had truly set her up. "I've never repaired a malfunction a tenth as serious as yours. Nobody has. I work pumps and pipes, not the reactor core work. Not the instrumentation."

"It's simple enough," Alex said with a sneer. "Either you seal the breach and get cooling back on the pile, then clean out the containment dome, or we dump and run." He paused to frown at her. "Either that, or we get someone else from Velor who can."

Vera laughed. "Good luck with that. My boss and I are the only people on Velor who work on these junkers any more."

She didn't tell them that the reason for that was that she had no credentials to work on anything more modern, and he was too old.

"So let's go see your problem child."

Chapter Three

Power Central, mining asteroid Corridor

The three of them were sitting in a conference room ten minutes later. Calen punched up video coverage of the internals of the power plant, and replayed the key events of the last

week's capture. The video revealed that several of the liquid sodium control valves had failed first, leading to a loss of coolant pressure and reactor overheat. The heat had increased the core pressure, and that had led to additional ruptures. The cascading loss of coolant finally sent temperatures soaring to the point where the reactor vessel cracked open and the emergency cooling system activated.

"You're damn lucky the vessel burst gently, not explosively," Vera said, leaning forward to point toward one corner of the hologram. "We gotta get some more coolant lines installed over there."

"We obviously know that," Alex sneered. "But the air temperature is approaching 700° C with the hot spots in the sludge above 1,400° C. Not to mention the rads."

Vera stared at him in disbelief. "1,400° C!" she gasped. "That's almost hot enough to melt stainless." She turned back to stare at the hologram. "Shit, once the core begins to melt, it's all over."

"Which is obviously why we needed a Velorian," Alex replied with his usual arrogance. "We can't get in there, and you're supposed to be fucking invulnerable."

Vera felt a shiver of fear trace up her back. Normal protocol for this kind of malfunction said to evacuate the area and rig the inside of the plant with megaton-sized fusion explosives. The fusion burst would hopefully vaporize everything and prevent the massive radioactive contamination that would come from a dirty plutonium explosion. That meant that everything within 20 kilometers of the plant would be destroyed, but the planet's environment would be saved. They'd resorted to that kind of desperation on several worlds when Model 7's went super-critical.

But obviously that wasn't going to work here, not inside this rock. Just as obviously, entering the contaminated dome was insane, even for her. She had no idea how resistant she'd be to the heat and radiation. Unlike a P-class, she'd never been taught the limitations of her abilities outside a gold field.

She shrugged, deciding she'd just have to go slow as she figured it out.

Calen saw the worried look on her face. "You've done this before, right?" he asked. "Helped shut down a rogue breeder?"

She stared at him for a moment, debating whether she should make up some story to reassure them, and then shook her head. "Until two days ago, I was an ordinary maintenance tech, working at a museum, keeping a model 10 running at low power."

"But they briefed you on our problem? How to fix it?"

"They didn't say jack to me. No study time ether, as they zoned me out on sleepy drugs during the flight. All they said was to get my butt on a ship and come here."

Alex stared at her in horror for a long moment before snorting disgustedly. He turned and walked out the door. Calen stayed behind, struggling to smile. He was trying to be supportive... maybe too much so, Vera realized, as he reached down to gently take her hand in his. "I'm sure you could place this beautiful hand in a caldron of molten steel and not be harmed." He lifted her hand to his lips, marveling at her soft skin as he gently kissed the back of her hand. "You're a goddess."

Vera laughed, more than a bit embarrassed by his words, and startled by his soft touch. No one had ever touched her so delicately before, let alone kissed her hand that way. A flutter of little tingles raced through her body to make her squirm. Despite her mental preparation for becoming empowered, and for Terran reactions to her, she definitely wasn't prepared for a guy to come on to her this way. Freedlings looking for somebody to share a good drunk on gold

liquor, that was O.K. Or guys who pumped up on gentech stimulants to fornicate the way Velorian P1's do... endlessly and indefatigably. She understood those kinds of men. But she'd never dealt with a man whose touch was so worshipful, a man who obviously put her on a pedestal. She found his affection strangely disturbing, enough to bring out her butchy side.

"So how the fuck do you know that I'm not going to just melt away inside there?" she challenged him crudely, struggling to overcome her growing confusion.

"If you weren't familiar with this kind of equipment," Alex answered first, walking back into the room to rejoin them, "then why did Velor send you? Surely they have people there with far greater... experience." Vera could tell by his pause that he'd substituted a kinder word than the one that had initially come to mind.

"It isn't the equipment that worries me, but the god-damn environment in there," Vera spit back at him. "As I said earlier, nobody else knows a fucking thing about breeders nowadays, except my boss, and he's a hundred and eighty. That obviously includes you guys."

"Hey, we did O.K.," Alex asserted again. "You said yourself, lady, these model 7's are prone to malfunctions."

"But with proper maintenance, you can keep them going a long time. And I'm hardly a lady."

"I was just trying to be nice," Alex sneered.

"Yeah, well fuck you too." Vera tossed at his back as she turned to look into Calen's eyes. "What matters is that I can fix old stuff, mostly antique equipment that nobody else is interested in, half of it junk that shouldn't even be running. I've got a special knack. I can probably fix this thing."

"Probably? There are two-thousand lives hinging on your skills," Alex sneered from behind her back as he walked back out the door.

Calen just stared at her, seemingly mesmerized by her eyes.

"So, Calen," she finally asked, amused by the look on his face, "have you met other Vels before? You seem to like blue eyes."

"Hell no. There aren't any Vels out this close to the rim, except this consulate guy who comes to Corridor once in a while. But I've never seen him. I guess he doesn't hang around for long."

Vera looked around at the gritty walls and sniffed the slightly sulfurous-smelling air, hazy as it was with yellow dust. Behind the sulfur was an underlying scent of machine oil and sweat. "This isn't exactly a holiday destination."

Calen said nothing for a long, awkward moment. "So what's with the tattoos," he finally asked as he looked down at the designs that covered her midriff. "I thought you Vels had steel skin or whatever."

Vera smiled as she followed his eyes down to her abs. Her tattoos were her pride, especially given their rarity on Velor. "Usually, yeah, that's right. But with enough x-rays and some very sharp Vendorian steel needles, we B-class types can get them. It's just a matter of pain tolerance."

"Pain? Something else I didn't think you could feel. So what was the occasion?"

"My boyfriend. Ex-boyfriend now. He and his friends were into it, and I rode with the gang for a while."

"Sounds like a long story there."

"One you're not old enough to hear."

"I'm not as young as I..." Calen started to object, only to be interrupted by a gravelly voice from behind them

"What aren't we gonna to hear?"

Vera spun around to see a huge man standing in the doorway, his height equal to hers, yet with a body three times as wide. He wore a brilliantly red beard and a long-sleeve shirt, his collar open to reveal an incredibly hairy chest. Vera stared in amazement; Velorian men didn't have body hair, but this man looked half human and half bear.

"And exactly who are you?" she asked.

"I run this god-forsaken place. Daniels is the name."

"Ah," Vera said, "the GM who buys dangerous reactors, subjecting all his employees to death by radiation poisoning."

"What the hell is she talking about, Alex?"

Alex appeared from behind him. "As I just told you, boss, she doesn't know shit."

Daniels glared at Vera. "Alex here tells me that you've never done a god-damn bit of work on a Model 7 before. Other than fixing some valves or some shit back on Velor. Just a bunch of low-level maintenance crap."

Vera smiled. Despite the challenge, she liked Daniels' attitude. No namby-pamby management talk here. He said what he thought without giving a damn for her feelings. Corridor was already living up to its reputation as a tough, no bullshit place.

"At least I can keep my shit working," Vera tossed back. "Now your pretty boys here, they're all schooled on high tech stuff, but they're the ones who fucked this thing up so bad that it's trying to kill them."

"Yeah, we knew there was some risk when we bought this plant."

"Except I haven't heard any evidence of a decent maintenance program, not even any workable spare parts. Seems they figured this piece of junk would run forever on its own, like some kind of fancy anti-matter plant."

"But you can get inside? Shut it down?"

"Don't know yet. So far, your boys here are more interested in talking my ears off and holding hands than getting down to work."

"They're trying to figure out if you're going to blow us to kingdom come," Daniels growled, "something I'm kind of interested in too. A fucking catastrophic melt-down might not hurt you, but I got a couple of thousand citizens to worry about."

"Then I'd be seriously worrying about them right about now."

Alex smiled condescendingly. "See, what did I tell you? She's all mouth and no brains. Velor really fucked us this time. Might as well have sent a god-damned Betan instead of this bimbo technician."

Vera jumped up, too hard as it turned out, for she hit her head hard enough to sent a riot of cracks radiating across the ceiling. She landed next to Alex to grab his shirt and lift him off the floor, shoving him backwards. He flew twenty feet before crashing into a wall of empty boxes along the far wall. "Betans are fucking Aureans," she hissed through tightly clenched teeth, trying desperately not to stare at Alex. She wasn't sure how her heat vision worked yet, and she didn't want to find out now. "And, yeah, I might be a fucking technician, but I ain't no bimbo." She turned on her heel and stormed out the door.

She was thirty feet down the hallway when Daniels burst through the door and raced to catch up with her. He was smiling broadly as he grabbed her arm and pulled her to a stop, turning to spit out the stub of a cigar that he'd been chewing on. "My boys don't like you."

Especially Alex. But your stock just went up in my book. I like a lady who can take care of herself."

"I'm not taking any more shit from that asshole."

"Good for you. You got some attitude and a fucking temper too. Even better, you aren't tossing any of that university-learned bullshit at me like those boys do." He held out his hand. "Let's start again, lady. I'm Glen Daniels. I'm the one who asked for and expected a Protector."

"As I told them, I'm not a lady, and I sure as fuck ain't a Protector, Daniels, but your boys in there don't have a clue how to fix your reactor. At best, they'd just shut it down, and without energy, you'd have to abandon the whole complex until you could get another reactor in here."

"Yeah, a hell of a loss. No time for that before we take a dive around the sun. Be fifteen centuries before we get a second chance."

"Then what's it worth to you if I fix your plant and keep it fixed?"

"Fixed?" Daniels sputtered. "Nobody said that was an option. They said we'd be lucky to shut it down in time for a transport to get here and take everyone off."

She pointed a finger into his chest, slamming him back against the wall hard enough to hurt. "That's because you didn't ask me, Daniels. I can fix any fucking thing that your boys here can break, and I can even do it inside that hell they've created in your containment dome."

"Then, by all means," Daniels smiled as he straightened up, massaging his sore chest. "Be my god-damn guest, Vera. What'ja need?"

"Remind your boys how bad they fucked this place up. And then tell them that they're working for me now."

Chapter Four

Alex and Calen caught up with Vera in the reactor maintenance shop a half-hour later. Their hangdog faces confirmed that they'd just had the ass chewing of their lives.

"If it makes any difference, you guys got a raw deal here," she said, trying to be conciliatory. She needed them on her side now.

"The equipment Daniels bought us is junk," Alex said defensively. "Everything falling apart. There's nothing here to fix it with. It's not my fault."

Vera ignored him as she turned to face Calen. "So how many of the coolant pipes are ruptured? Exactly."

"Seven, with two about to go. We're another rupture away from going super-critical."

"Then it's a good thing you got yourself a supergirl. First order of business is to get some coolant back on the pile."

They followed Vera into a gymnasium-sized store room as she started sorting through some thick stainless steel pipes. "We got to get us some redundancy going as well. How 'bout we run a couple of new lines direct from the coolant engine?"

"Inside the containment dome?" Calen asked incredulously. "That's imposs..." He paused as Vera lifted one of the pipes off the floor. It weighed half a ton, but it looked weightless in her hands. "Oh, yeah..."

"Always did like it hot," Vera winked at Calen. "Hope you don't mind staying out here and letting me do the hard work?"

Calen looked down at her huge biceps, clearly impressed. "So are all Vels as built as you are?"

Vera shook her head. "Most of them look like skinny models. Nothing on their bones 'cept pretty. But I think a little muscle is going to come in handy here."

"A little?" Calen nodded in amazement as he stared at her huge arm, apparently trying to imagine how strong she must be outside a gold field. He must have never seen a Terran woman with that kind of muscle, let alone a Vel.

"So, you like strong women?" Vera asked as she saw the admiring way he was staring at her biceps.

Calen quickly looked up at her, eyes wide, his feelings of insecurity rising as he felt himself falling back into those incredibly blue depths. "I've read a lot about you... about Vels I mean. I just never thought I'd meet one of you." Outside of my dreams, he almost said. "Your eyes are... incredible."

Vera smiled at the unusual compliment. Nobody on Velor had ever commented on her eyes. "And here I thought you liked my muscles."

"I... I've never met anyone who looked like you," Calen stammered, apparently not sure what he was supposed to say to a superwoman.

Alex stared disgustedly at the two of them before turning to head for the control room, announcing his intention to keep Calen updated on the reactor vitals.

Vera went to work stacking a half-dozen pipes near the entrance to the containment dome while Calen did some calculations on what sizes she'd likely need inside. She sifted through the nearly empty storeroom to gather up whatever else she could.

They finally met again in the maintenance shop, both of them staring at the vault-like door into the containment dome. "I figure the heat and radiation have welded it closed by now," Calen volunteered. "You'll have to cut it open." He pointed to the plasma torch beside her.

She turned to look back into his eyes. "I'm going to walk into the fires of hell itself, Calen, and a whole lot of that hell is going to escape into this work area. I'd get your butt out of here and join your friend in the control room."

Calen nodded, numbed by the mere thought of anyone exposing themselves to the heat and radiation he knew was behind that door. He started to turn away, only to have her reach out and take his hand.

"Wait a second."

He turned back to see Vera reaching up to take her diamond earrings and necklace off.

"Take these." She opened his hand and placed them in it.

Calen nodded, still numb.

"And these too." She crossed her arms and quickly pulled her top off. She wore nothing but tanned perfection beneath it. Her breasts sat high and were perfectly round, her nipples unusually large. The intricate design and colors of her body art were dazzling.

"Wow," Calen said as he swallowed hard, his heart leaping as Vera winked at him and undid her belt to peel her jeans off as well. Her flat stomach flowed downward to her naked sex, stunning him with the realization that the architects of her race had made everything perfect. Her labia were as beautiful as her lips.

"I... I, ah, see that rumors of Velorian perfection aren't exaggerated," he stumbled, trying to keep his cool as he traced his eyes over her tight curves and flawless skin, admiring the full scope of her elaborate tattoos. They wound their way upwards to her breasts and down the inside of her legs and across her back, the elaborate designs and vivid colors taking his breath away. "You're a work of art. So incredibly beautiful."

Vera's cheeks took on a rosy glow, her nipples firming visibly as she rested her hands on her hips and took a deep breath, unable to resist showing off her improved figure. "I've been called many things back on Velor, but beautiful was definitely not one of them. Not with these tattoos. Most people considered them a form of self-mutilation."

"Then the people of Velor are insane," he said in a serious voice, still trying to catch his breath. "You're a living, breathing superfemme, and a work of art from head to toe."

"No argument on the second point," she said as she folded up her clothes neatly. "I just hope I can claim the first point an hour from now."

"With your strength? No problem."

Vera laughed. "It's more my ability to withstand all that heat and radiation that worries me. My only protection is bare skin and Velorian genetics."

"I'm not sure why, but I find that incredibly... exciting." Calen was going to say arousing, but he was starting to feel intimidated. What kind of man would impress a woman like Vera? He pushed that misplaced thought away. "I mean, it's just so kick ass cool that you can bend steel bars and all that jazz."

Vera laughed, trying not to blush further. "I guess only a Terran could appreciate that. On Velor I was weak, ugly and low-class, not to mention uneducated."

Calen winced, painfully remembering his early comments on her lack of credentials. "Sometimes, we don't understand about different..."

Vera spun around without waiting for him to finish. She picked up the plasma torch and tested it by firing it up and playing it across her fingers, the white-hot flame nearly blinding Calen. Vera jerked her fingers back and put them in her mouth to cool, a high-pitched sizzle of steam escaping. "Ouch, that's hot."

Calen just stared, well aware that the plasma torch burned at 10,000°C. "I think you'd better start, ah, probably at the top of the door," he said woodenly, his brain racing in two many directions at once to think clearly. "Lower part of the door is probably wet from the radioactive coolant slush. The last thing we need is to let some of that escape and contaminate the working spaces."

Vera stood facing him, enticingly naked, a funny smile on her face, as the plasma torch blazed blindingly bright in her hand. "Got it. Now get you butt out of here. It's going to get seriously nasty here once I break the seal."

Calen turned and ran, his eyes watering from the glare of the torch, a headache already growing from having looked at the flame.

Vera turned back to study the top of the door, located twelve feet off the ground. She wasn't going to be able to float up and hang there. Not yet anyway. Until she got some practice, her flying skills were limited to hops and jumps.

Instead, she leaped up and wrapped her legs around the vertical I-beam that was part of the door frame. The steel gave off a muted groan as it collapsed slightly between her thighs - she was gripping it too enthusiastically.

That amused her, bringing with it a more sobering thought. If I-beams couldn't handle a gentle squeeze of her legs, God help a man. Getting laid here was going to be a problem for sure.

She pushed that misplaced thought away as she leaned far to the right to begin playing the plasma flame across the upper seam of the door. The steel squealed and bubbled and finally melted to run down the front of the door like water. She heated a meter-wide section of the door to white-hot incandescence, and then dropped the torch to let it swing on its lanyard

as she stretched her arm out to dig her long fingers into the glowing crack. She had to strain a bit, the steel was inches thick and only the outer inch or two was near molten, but she managed to peel the softened steel back far enough to widen the crack, the jelly-like glowing metal running over her hand and wrist, making her skin glow, but not burning her.

The escaping heat from inside the dome was another thing. Noxious radioactive gasses blew her hair backward as she leaned over to look through the crack. She saw the massive stainless steel reactor standing in the middle of a large room, one corner of it glowing bluish-white. Even more horrifying, the floor was a churning mass of molten sodium mixed with steel alloys. Half-critical blobs of plutonium sent swirls of orange and blue and pink bubbles rising. It was the most dangerous mixture from hell ever conceived by man.

She gritted her teeth and put her raw strength to work now, her arms and shoulders coming alive with Velorian muscularity as she peeled the thick steel door outward with every twist of her wrists, the protesting door screaming from the strain. She thought briefly of Calen, knowing he was watching her on the monitor, most likely studying the intense definition of her back muscles as she dug her fingers even deeper into the thick steel. That somehow made her feel even stronger as she bent the vault-like door open, all six-inches thick of it. Within minutes, she'd created a gap wide enough to slip her body through.

The hellish glare of heat and violent radiation was blasting through the opening with hurricane strength now, giving her face and hair a reddish glow as she tried to worm her way headfirst through the gap. Sucking in her breath as her bare chest scraped uncomfortably across the ragged steel, she popped through to splash down on the floor of the containment dome.

She promptly slipped and nearly fell, the god-awful radioactive alloy coating her legs. She held her breath as she submerging her arms in the knee-deep sludge to feel her way around a large valve that was submerged in the sludge. The lethal mixture of alloys burned her skin wherever it touched her. Lethal dose for a mere Terran was between 150 and 500 rads, yet more than 9,000 rads were bombarding her now. Not that a Terran would have noticed. The thousand degree Centigrade heat would have disintegrated his body before he even came in contact with the molten alloy.

She looked down at her chest and saw a blue glow surrounding her body on the side facing the reactor, the effect making it look as if she was encased in a forcefield. A shimmer of sparks traced across it to make her skin prickle unpleasantly. Amazingly, the hard gamma rays were being bent and deflected by her invulnerable skin, which created the blue glow of Cerenkov radiation. The energetic deflection of rays were exciting photons in the ultraviolet to visible blue spectrum. She'd read about the effects of hard radiation against active shields, but had never thought her body would do the same.

She had no time to wonder about it, for the caustic radioactive vapors were tearing at her lungs, making every breath an agony. She emptied her lungs and held her breath as she slogged her way across the hellishly hot floor, her skin itching like a thousand fire ants were biting her as the blue glow surrounding her front-side grew brighter by the step. She ignored the pain as she narrowed her eyes and began studying the reactor.

She was quickly horrified to find that she could see all the way through a fissure in one corner and see the fuel rods melting inside, releasing more molten plutonium to flow down into the slush even as she watched.

They didn't have a day before it went critical, but hours at most!

"One more fuck-up..." she tried to say after taking a tiny breath, but her lungs were so hot that her words came out as little more than a whistle of steam.

She spun around and slogged her way back toward the door, only to trip over another piece of submerged machinery. This time she fell to her knees, her head spinning so dizzily from the radiation and heat that she could barely get back to her feet. Not only that, but she lost her grip on the torch, losing it beneath the sludge. Unable to even think of flying now, she leaped up to grab the top of the door, astounded to see two parallel grooves from where her nipples had dug into the steel on her entrance.

She left two more grooves as she wormed her way back through the crack to drop down into the now contaminated maintenance shop, the air blessedly cool. She didn't pause to enjoy it before gathering up the heavy coolant pipes and launching them through the high opening like spears. Soon a dozen of them were submerged in the radioactive sludge inside.

Emptying her lungs again, not that the air was that much better outside the dome now, she popped back through the opening to fish around for them. Given that she'd lost the plasma torch on her first trip, her heat vision, hands and legs were the only tools she had now. Primitive, but hopefully effective tools, given the unique abilities of her empowerment.

She started her work by leaping up to straddle one of the thick steel pipes, the metal glowing cherry-red from the super-heated coolant. She gritted her teeth and crossed her ankles, concentrating on closing her thighs. Unlike the I-beam she'd accidentally deformed, the thick-walled high-tensile pipe took some real muscle to deform. Her thighs bulged with even harder steel as she slowly crushed the pipe closed, the four-inch thick walls squealing like a thing alive as she finally pinched the pipe off. Relaxing her legs, she scooted backwards along the pipe to an intact section, placing her hands between her legs to press her fingernails against the steel pipe.

She jerked her shoulders to the side as she tried to fly sideways, the grip of her legs instead propelling her body in a circle around the pipe while digging her fingernails deeply into it. It took a dozen rotations to neatly cut the pipe in half, her body behaving like a gigantic pipe-cutter. She dropped down and cleaned up the edges as best she could with her nails, and then jammed a section of new pipe up against the old.

Welding it with her heat vision required a lot more skill than merely crushing and tearing it. Her first join looked terrible, the thick steel sagging all along the bottom of the weld, the pipe dimpled and half melted. It was the ugliest weld in the universe, she thought, but by Skietra, it was holding.

Her next weld went better, and by the time she'd joined a half dozen pipes, they looked almost respectable. Unfortunately, her eyes were dry and burning now and her head ached terribly. Even worse, a line from her forehead to her chest felt like it was on fire from all the energy she'd been conducting through her nervous system. She pushed through the pain, knowing she had little time to finish the job.

Less than an hour later, she'd restored sufficient liquid sodium flow back to the pile to stop the fuel rods from melting further. The task now was to close the breach in the reactor itself.

That proved to be even harder, as the six-inch thick steel had peeled back and partially melted to join the sludge on the floor. Fortunately, her skin temperature was now so close to that of molten steel that she could use her body as a crude welder. She spread her arms wide around one corner, exposing her bared chest directly to the lethal inner glow of the reactor as she squeezed her arms inward, trying to seal the gap. The steel bulged uselessly above and

below her hands. Frustrated, she spread her legs the same way, adding the surface area of her inner thighs to her hands as she tried to get the thick steel to flow back to close the gap. Frustrated when it still squished together the wrong way, she had a burst of inspiration. She pressed her sternum against the gap and pressed her hands inward against her breasts, using that softer flesh to distribute her incredible strength as she rubbed herself up and down the fissure.

Strangely, the blinding pain in her head and chest seemed to recede a bit as the heat and radiation blasted against the center of her body from chin to pubic bone, heating her both inside and out. The burning and prickling of her skin was washed away by an overwhelming burst of enticing tingles that seemed to come from nowhere.

She onto those tingles to surf along on a hurricane of raw needfulness, her body vibrating tantalizingly, the wash of erotic heat nearly overwhelming her with its urgency, engulfing her in the most difficult battle of contrary forces she'd ever experienced.

It took all her determination to keep her hands from her body and focus that raw erotic strength into sealing off the melted plutonium. But a few more kilograms of plutonium on the containment floor, and her body's coming release wouldn't be the only explosion she had to deal with.

She gritted her teeth like a true heroine and pushed past her needs just the way she'd pushed past her pain earlier, and put her heat vision to work welding the crudely closed gap in the steel. Her eyes began to burn even more horribly from the unaccustomed energies, and her breasts were soon aching from the rapid orgone metabolism and the tons of force she was exerting against them. Fortunately, she was absorbing energy nearly as fast as she was burning it. She patiently passed the focal point of her eyes along the seam again and again, using the smoothness of her breasts to work the steel inward, smoothing it, trying to get it to weld shut. Finally, the welds started to hold and the increased coolant flow began to cool the reactor down.

She felt like she was going to explode from inside out as she dropped back down into the knee-deep sludge, but she was also intensely proud to be female. No man could have repaired the fissure.

The problem now was with the heavier molten plutonium gathering in the low spots of the floor, threatening to reach super-critical mass. She remembered Calen saying something about an exhaust tube that led all the way to the surface of the asteroid to vent off radioactive gasses in case of a less severe malfunction.

She narrowed her eyes and tried to look beneath the sludge, but her tachyon vision wasn't working due to the amount of lead that was mixed in. She resorted to dropping down on her hands and knees to begin feeling her way around until she found what felt like a pressure valve. Without considering the consequences, she tore at it with her fingers, ripping it out of the floor with a Herculean tug. A violent vortex appeared in the sludge as it began racing down the hole, giving off a sound like a half-clogged vacuum cleaner hose. Clearly there was hard vacuum on the other side.

Without considering the consequences, she lay on her side to form herself into a crude plow and started to push the sludge toward the hole. The radioactive poisons penetrated every opening of her body, every crevice, the heat seemingly homing in on that hooded nub of pure pleasure that was her desire. She bit her lip and focused instead on keeping the miners alive, on Calen in particular, as she struggled to get as much of the sludge down that tube before the pressure inside the living spaces fell low enough to threaten the miners with decompression

and hypoxia. Her breach of the airlock door into the dome had eliminated their safety mechanism.

Four minutes passed before she managed to get most of the sludge close enough to the pipe entrance for the tube to evacuate it. She took a last look around the containment dome, seeing that her crude welds were holding, and then scrunched her shoulders inward and dove head-first into the vacuum tube.

It was a long trip to the surface, eleven kilometers to be exact, and along most of the length, the steel pipe was replaced by rough walls of rock that were coated with molten plutonium and steel. She finally exited the far end of the tube to splash into a huge holding tank that was anchored to the outside of the asteroid.

Turning back, she folded and hammered the end of the pipe closed with her fists, sealing it off to restore the asteroid's atmosphere. Only then did she dare look around, opening her eyes wide to see through the walls of the HazMat scow. She was rewarded by a vision of stars. And largest of all by far, was the sun.

She was miles outside her expertise now, but she knew she had to get this radioactive hell away from the asteroid. Her flying power was the only way. Turning to press her back against the inner curve of the tank, she spread her arms and legs wide to distribute the stress across the thin steel, and began to concentrate on flying. Her breasts tingled even more wildly as a sense of weightlessness filled her, her nipples standing up like small thumbs again, her breasts lifting as if she was in zero-G before flattening against her ribs as her volatai tried to displace her backward.

The grapples that attached the tank to the asteroid began to shudder, the vibration shaking the tank wildly. She bit her lip and concentrated harder, building the buzzy, weightless, tingling in her chest, seemingly homing in on her nipples.

The long suppressed needs of the last hours finally caught up with her, bringing with them a long-threatened orgasm. A explosion of new tingles raced downward across her straining abs to zero in on her needful sex. She suddenly felt as if her body was exploding from the inside out as the most intensely erotic pleasure of her life tore the last of the sensibilities from her mind, hot, sharp, tingling wonderfulness filling her body, washing away every conscious thought to replace it with the sheer pleasure of unbounded sexual release.

She never felt the grapples exploding apart as the tank lurched free to begin careening outward, accelerating so rapidly toward the sun that it blinked out of view in two seconds flat.

Chapter Five

It was sheer pandemonium inside Corridor as the pressure alarms screamed.

"Where's that alarm coming from?" Daniels shouted over the roar of wind as he ran gasping through the door of the control room. The air was already getting thin.

"Containment dome... emergency evacuation tube is torn open and we can't isolate the work area. The door into the dome can't be closed. The Vel tore a hole through it."

"Well, geniuses. fucking do something or we're all dead." Daniels' normally ruddy face was white as a sheet.

Then, as suddenly as the decompression had started, it ended. "What the..." Daniels started to say, only to have one of the operators point at a screen

"Shit... look at that!"

Daniels looked up to see one of the HazMat waste containers accelerating away from the asteroid. "What the hell... those things don't have engines."

"Vera... she followed the evacuation of the reactor sludge down the pipe," Calen said in astonishment. "She's inside it."

"And she's flying my friggin' waste container exactly where?" Daniels demanded.

Alex looked up from his instruments. "Towards Klaxton's sun, near as I can compute. She broke the docking clamps."

"The skin of that container is over 1,000°C and rising, " Calen added as he checked the display in front of him. "And it's radiating gamma rays like mad. God knows how she's surviving inside that hell."

"She's going to save us all," one of the control room technicians gushed worshipfully. "Like an angel from heaven." Several of the men began to cheer and clap. One of them kneeled down and began to pray.

Daniels grunted, his usual brusqueness returning now that the emergency had passed. "Cost me a fucking half million credits to get her here. Now she steals a god-damned HazMat container. She damn well better have fixed that sick reactor of yours, or I'm going to get my money's worth out of your hides."

Chapter Six

Vera cycled in through the airlock a day later, dehydrated and sore. Her travel to the sun had been helped along by a hundred orgasms as the heat and radiation overcame her. It had been all she could do to aim the container back towards the sun after each of her wild flailings around inside. In the end, she'd barely been aware enough to punch through the softened walls as it fell into the sun, giving the container a last push to ensure its fatal spiral into the core.

She was coated in cooling steel and plutonium alloy from head to toe. Inside as well, which was starting to irritate her, belying the Velorian myth of absolute invulnerability. The decontamination process took forever as the now hardened alloy was everywhere. Ears, nose, mouth. And all the way in to her cervix. Not nice.

She had to resort to using her heat vision, reflected from a mirror to reach the hard places, melting the deadly alloy so it would flow out of the various cavities. She hoped she'd never have to explain how she did that to anyone. All she knew was that it was suddenly very good to be super flexible. She finished by scrubbing her skin down a dozen times, first with her fingernails and then with various steel-bristled brushes, finally some plastic scrubbies.

Her hair took forever, along with a lot more heat vision. Fortunately her wise act of holding her breath had kept the liquefied metal out of her lungs. She had no idea how she would have cleaned them, and her radioactive exhalations would have given new meaning to bad breath.

She was soon more or less back to normal, except for carrying a huge energy load. She stood in the maintenance shop adjusting her clothing, finally deciding that nothing she'd brought from Velor was going to fit worth a damn. She flexed her arm, and her biceps rose large and sharp-edged, the merest exertion sending unwanted tingles through her body. Exerting herself when she carried this much energy had a wickedly erotic effect, but she'd had quite enough experience having sex with herself the last day. What she could really do with was a couple of nights back with the gang on Velor.

Calen walked out of the control room at that moment, grinning wildly as he found her standing there.

"Wow! You're back to normal..." He paused to look at her oversized chest. "Well, almost."

"Orgone," she shrugged. "I gotta burn it off."

"Speaking of burning, I still don't believe what I saw in there, what with you using your body as some kind of welder."

"Twarnd't nothing," she winked, knowing it had in reality been the most dramatic act of her life.

"Bullshit. But the reactor is holding. Amazing repairs."

"Thank Skietra for the small miracles," she shrugged as she flashed him a brilliant smile. Her teeth were as white as ivory now. "Don't tell anyone, but I was a fucking mile over my head in there."

"But you said you could fix anything. I'm a believer."

"Don't count your blessings yet. Give it some time to see if it holds. It's still touch and go. I just hope I don't have to do that again."

"Yeah, I saw Alex's calculation. You were exposed to more than ten-thousand rads in there. Yet watching you wading around nude in that molten alloy, coated from head to foot, you might as well have been a goddess..." Calen gushed before he caught himself, blushing a little. "I'm sorry... but it was just so incredible. I don't know what words can describe it."

"What part? The repair or watching me parading around naked?"

Calen laughed. "We'll have to make you our naked goddess of technology. But seriously, that was something right out of those erotic Velorian holos floating around. We've seen them on Kelsor 7. We even brought a few here."

Vera laughed. "So I'm really a goddess now, huh? That's a switch. You don't even want to know what they called me back on Velor."

"Beautiful, I'm sure."

"Yeah, I'm sure," she smirked.

"But with your mix of strength and beauty..." he gushed, trying to restrain himself, "combined with your absolute invulnerability. And those gorgeous tattoos. Only a goddess could claim such perfection. "

Vera smiled. "Keep talking like that, and I'll have to have my way with you."

Calen looked startled as she winked at him while casually juggling two large steel bearings in her hands. They were almost too large to get her fingers around.

"Don't try this at home," she winked as she paused to grip them as tightly as she could. The tendons on the backs of her hands rose like steel cables. She lifted her hands to stare at them. "I have to admit, it's seriously cool to be this fucking strong. And the harder I work out, the better I feel. I swear could get off just by working out."

Calen couldn't help but blush as he daringly reached out to touch her forearm, never dreaming that mere exertion could be so erotic... for both of them. He traced his fingers lovingly over the hard tendons of her wrist, then upward, following the steel of her forearm. He had to step behind her as she poured her strength into the steel bearings, heating them from compressive friction. Her skin was so warm and silky, yet it was stretched as tightly as steel foil over her proud muscles. "God... you are so amazingly strong. I would love to see you... work out more."

Vera smiled, knowing that wasn't exactly what he had in mind. "It would be nice to have you here... touching me... when I do."

Calen boldly lifted his hands higher, his fingers wrapping around the hard swell of her biceps. It felt like a warm ball of living steel, and so large that he couldn't get his fingers around it. He'd never met a woman so profoundly muscular, even less a woman with a hundredth of her strength. His heart pounded like a jungle drum as he struggled to comprehend the fantastic power that filled his hands.

Getting off on his excitement, Vera kept pouring more and more strength into her hands, the tingle of her straining muscles growing ever more demanding, which in turn made her stronger yet. Her hands began to glow white-hot as half-molten steel began to ooze from between her fingers.

Realizing with a shock where this was going, knowing she'd quickly become too hot for Calen to handle, she quickly dropped the mangled bearings on the floor, shaking the remnants of molten steel from her hands so they could quickly cool. She was far more interested in his touch now than merely showing off, his gentle fingers sending wild thrills tracing across her skin. His touch was like erotic fire.

As soon as her body had absorbed most of the heat, she reached behind her to open the door to a maintenance closet, and grabbed his shirt to pull him in behind her. A tangle of valves and pipes and machinery surrounded them, but she had eyes only for him. "Touch me," she gasped. "Everywhere."

Alex boldly placed his free hand on her chest, pulling downward on the black stretchy fabric, struggling to free her left breast. She shrugged her shoulders to free her top, and helped him pull it down to her waist. He closed his hand over her fullness, finding her breast deliciously firm, yet still so very feminine, her large, erect nipple boring into his hand.

"Oh, Skietra, yes..." she gasped as he held both the hardest and softest parts of her body with equal enthusiasm. She began to squirm under his hands, her nipples growing impossibly larger. Her legs began to shake and she staggered, slipping partway down the wall to sit down softly on the floor. Her mouth opened in a perfect O as she began to shake her head from side to side, her eyes distant and unfocused, body vibrating with desire.

Realizing with a shock that she was at the very edge of an orgasm, Calen released his tight grip on her breast and circled his fingers delicately around her nipples. She cried out in encouragement, and he knew in that moment that she was going to come, right here among the machines and valves of her trade. She was going to come for him.

He played his touch against her nipples like a pianist at his keyboard, and she became the willing instrument of his desires.

Chapter Seven

The back alleys of Corrididor

Calen wasn't sure if he was entering the door of heaven or hell several days later as he led the way through the narrow, winding streets of Corrididor, passing a number of rough-looking pubs until he came to one that looked half respectable. Vera had wanted to go drinking, and he knew that this bar catered to the mining superintendents, foremen and engineers. The fake wood front with shuttered windows and the flashing 'Globst' beer sign over the door marked it as an upscale bar. Not that anything was really upscale on Corrididor. But he'd had Daniels arrange a deepteach program in Klaxtonian, in case she had to stay here on Corrididor. That should come in handy at the bar, too.

"This joint probably isn't up to your standards," he said apologetically, "but this is the best watering hole on the rock."

Vera laughed as she followed him into the dingy interior. "If you had any idea of the places I used to hang out on Velor, you'd think this was a fucking palace."

A number of burly miners sat at the bar, still in their jumpsuits. One of them spotted Vera in the doorway and nudged the man next to him. Soon everyone was turning to stare at Vera as she walked under the lights, her hair glowing a brilliant blonde after the bleaching effects of the radiation. She was incredibly tall and statuesque, like some kind of Valkyrie. The men looked from her to Calen and back, seemingly disbelieving that he was accompanying such an incredible woman.

Or so Calen imagined. He tried to guide Vera to a table in the darkest corner of the bar, but she turned and walked over to the bar, slamming her palm on it. "You got any decent god-damned bourbon in this place?" she challenged the bartender.

So much for low profile, Calen groaned.

The one-eyed man behind the bar, a disabled miner, stared at her for a long moment before gesturing toward the bottle rack behind him. "Whatever I got is right there, honey. Or down here." He grabbed his crotch. That wouldn't have needed translation.

Vera laughed. "I think I need something a lot stronger than that. What's in the bottles?"

Calen sighed, passed that on, and followed her over to sit down on one of the bar stools, glancing anxiously at the huge miner sitting beside him. The miner put his hand on Calen's chest and slowly pushed him backward to keep from blocking his view of Vera.

"Give me and my friend a double BC," she said. That meant Ballard's Canyon, the best bourbon money could buy in the Enlightenment, although it was usually watered down or faked in cheap bars.

One-Eye poured two shots and then set the heavy leaded glasses down in front of her. Vera downed hers in a single gulp. Then, before Calen could lift his, she startled him by crushing her shot glass to powder, opening her hand to let the glass fragments float down to coat the top of the bar. She placed her hand over Calen's drink. "That was complete shit," she scowled at the bartender. "How about serving us the real stuff. From the bottle you keep under the bar."

The bartender stared at her again, then at the glass shards, and got the message, slowly reaching under the bar for an identical looking bottle. He poured two more drinks. "That stuff was pretty good," he said apologetically. "Not many can tell the difference."

"Hey, you're that Velorian," the miner next to Calen said as he leaned toward Vera, crowding Calen back even further. He stuck out his hand. "I just heard the fucking news. You saved all our asses."

Vera tossed her second drink down as she reached out with her other hand to grip the miner's huge mitt. He winced slightly. "I am that. Name's Vera. And you are?"

"Ted Danvost. Superintendent at the Etos mine."

"Glad to meet 'ya, Ted. This is my friend Calen. He's one of the power engineers that keeps your place running."

Danvost looked doubtfully at Calen before offering his hand. It was Calen who winced this time as the miner's huge mitt closed painfully around his hand. "You guys are friends, huh?" He looked at Vera, then back at Calen, his right eyebrow lifting. "I would'a thought a woman like you would go for a man with a little more... substance. Backbone even."

Vera wrapped her arm around Calen and cooed as she lowered her hand to his lap. "It's not his back bone that interests me."

Calen's eyes opened wide as her fingers traced his hardening outline. Danvost guffawed. "Yeah. We heard that about you Vels." He looked doubtfully at Calen. "Must be a hell of a lot more to you than meets the eye, boy."

Vera winked conspiratorially at Calen before continuing. "You wouldn't believe what he just did to me in a maintenance closet. I'm still trying to catch my breath. Never felt so hot in my life. Power guys rock."

"Then, by God, I'll drink to power," another miner bellowed. Calen recognized him as chief engineer at the Spyron mine. "Bartender, another round of good stuff for my two new friends here."

Six drinks and an hour later, Calen was passed out in one of the booths, and Vera was sitting at a corner table with a half dozen miners. Three of the strongest were gasping and groaning as they strained together to arm-wrestle her. Her upper body was incredibly defined, a maze of hard muscular curves rising as she appeared to be straining mightily, never letting the men know that she was directing more than 95% of her strength internally, straining against herself isometrically, the mere 5% of strength that she directed toward the three men proving sufficient to slowly bend their arms down on the table.

"Another round, bartender," she chortled as the men fell gasping to the floor, their arms cramping. Three more huge men took their places and she did it all over again, this time while downing the drinks they'd set in front of her.

It continued this way for the next half hour. The miners were determined, and all six of them joined up to oppose her single arm. They didn't last any longer. Finally recognizing the futility of it all, they turned back to serious drinking, slamming their shot glasses back onto the table after each round, sometimes hard enough to shatter them.

Vera astounded the men by putting one of the glasses in her mouth and slowly crunched it up and swallowed it like it was little more than a potato chip. They bought her another drink just to watch her do that again.

She found herself falling back into the demonstrative and flirtatious pattern that she'd enjoyed while hanging out with the freedlings back on Velor. She teased the men, touching them a lot, allowing their hands to wander a little as well before finally rising to stand against the wall. The men had become increasingly curious about her physical talents, and it was time to show them something. Something that would rock even their most fantastic imaginings about her people.

She posed while flexing her left arm as hard as she could and then held it. Orgone energy flashed upward from her breasts to power her exertion, her large biceps gradually beginning to glow in the subdued light of the bar. She poured more and more strength into it, almost to the point of cramping, and her nipples began to burn, her breasts heating enough to glow a dull red as the rush of orgone metabolism fueled her nearly white-hot biceps. Her top burst into flames as her upper body turned red hot, and the paint on the wall behind her began to blister.

The entire bar just stared at her open mouthed, astounded as the flames licked around her body, gradually revealing the extent of her elaborate tattoos. She stood like a glowing beacon of naked art as her top was reduced to a circle of ash around her feet.

The miners shook their heads and slapped each other on the backs as they staggered back to the bar for another shot, glancing back at her every few seconds, laughing about how she was the ultimate "hot chick."

Vera joined them when her skin cooled, remaining bare-breasted as the men's hands wandered a bit more familiarly as they took turns singing the old songs of their native worlds. The singing and drinking soon became a contest to see who was going to be the last person standing.

They were big, hard-drinking men and they could handle their booze, but a freedling chick from Velor was definitely more than they could handle. Especially after she undid her hair and began running her fingers sensually through the long strands. The tiny pheromone glands in her scalp filled the room with the faint scent of honey and wildflowers. The already aroused and drunken men awakened like they never had before, the complex chemistry of her pheromones, capable of briefing invigorating a man far beyond their normal limits, serving to both sober and arouse them. They soon felt like the supermen they often imagined they were during their drunkenness.

Enjoying their primitive reactions to her scent, not to mention their increased alcohol tolerance, Vera barely resisted the desire to flop on her back in the middle of the pool table and invite one and all to celebrate their sexuality. Such had been her drinking habit since she was fifteen and traveling with the freedling gang. Unfortunately, her favorite kind of sex, athletic and inexhaustible, competitive even, wasn't going to work with these men.

The men seemed to understand that. Most of them were experts in drilling, and they recognized hard rock when they saw it.

Smiling, she offered them an alternative, and led them down the street to a place they'd passed on the way down here. Purple Heaven was the best brothel on Corridor, and Vera convinced the madam to give her new friends a world-class night. She offered to let them in on the secret of Velorian lovemaking if her girls would burn the nearly superhuman power of the men's pheromic highs. For free.

Vera sat with the madam as the men played, the madam eager to learn the secret of what she'd done to the men to get them so hot. Vera looked through ceilings and walls to see the men having their fun, feeling sad that she couldn't join in. Sighing, she let the madam smell her hair, draping it over her as she watched the changes awaken the old whore's body. The madam went from businesswoman to her willing sexual slave in two minutes flat. The madam's arousal so complete that she was could barely contain herself.

"All that from your hair," she gasped. "If I had some of that, I'd be a millionaire."

"Sorry, the hair doesn't come off," Vera smiled as she allowed the randy madam to kiss her fondly before saying her goodbyes. She returned to the bar to gather the sleeping Calen up in her arms and carried him out into the street.

Her long, blonde hair was the last thing the madam saw of her that night as she ran down the street at fantastic speed.

Chapter Eight

Pantheon Apartments

Calen opened his eyes to find that he was lying on his bed. It was already the daylight period, and artificial light was streaming through the windows of his bedroom. He turned his head to the side and winced; it felt as if someone was pounding on the inside of his head with little hammers. He turned further, and was rewarded by the sight of Vera's tattooed back beside him, her jeans hanging from the chair by his desk. Startled to find himself in bed with

her, he tried to remember how he'd gotten here, even more urgently, to remember what they'd done together. Frustratingly, the last thing he remembered was the bar spinning around him.

He ignored his pounding head to roll over and take a closer look at the perfection of her back. Even sleeping, her muscle tone was remarkable, the subtle curves revealing the steel that lay beneath the almost airbrushed look of her skin. The tiny hairs that covered a Terran body were absent, even when he studied her this closely, and the pores were nearly invisible, leaving only the very fine texture of her skin. Somehow the fact that her skin still had human texture comforted him, although he already knew that Velorians and Terrans had come from the same base genome. He gently brushed his fingers through her glowing hair, and found it was silky and warm.

She stirred at his feathery touch, and rolled over to face him, her blue eyes large and luminous, her breath sweet despite the long night of drinking. "I think I like this place, Calen."

"What place?"

"Corridor. Also your bed."

A thrill of desire raced through his body as he smelled the remnants of that wonderful honey and wildflower scent rising from her hair. The thrill magically erased his hangover, leaving him staring deeply into her amazing eyes.

Her invitation was clear, but unfortunately another part of his biology asserted itself with even great urgency than his desires. He had to relieve himself. Unfortunately, when he planted his first foot on the floor, the room started to spin again and his stomach lurched nauseously. Vera quickly flipped herself across the bed to wrap her long legs around him, steadying him. He inhaled more of the scent from her hair and the room stopped spinning again. "Jesus, if we could bottle that pheromone stuff, we'd made billions."

She tossed her head, covering him with her silky hair. "The madam was thinking millions last night."

"What madam?" he asked, turning his head back to look at her.

She winked. "Let my scent be my gift to you."

"What... what the hell happened last night?"

"You mean, besides you passing out?"

"Yeah..."

"You so don't want to know."

"Jesus," he groaned as he staggered to his feet. Vera guided him toward the bathroom, holding him steady as he stood over the loo. "I'm such a wimp."

She shrugged. "Some men have brains, some have brawn, but rarely the two. Yesterday I needed your brains, just as I will today, but last night I needed something else. It was best you passed out early. Freedlings and miners, we have a few tastes in common."

Calen turned to stare back at her again, his imagination racing to fill in the blanks. Wild rumors about Velorian sexual habits had become rampant on Corridor since she'd arrived. A miner's claim to fame was his brawn and his endurance and his smarts around machinery. In contrast, Calen did all his work with his fingers on a keyboard or with his mind attached to a neural link, and he had the pale, undeveloped body to show for it. He felt Vera's breasts pressing warmly against his back as he leaned over the toilet and began to download last night's over indulgence.

He was strangely relieved when Vera started to get dressed when they came back out of the bathroom, pulling on one of his t-shirts to replace her burned one. He felt himself stir as he

saw the erotic way she filled it out. He stood in his skivvies, half aroused and half hung-over, not sure what to do now.

He decided the safest thing was to pick up where they left off at work yesterday. "I'm, ah, I'm going to remind Daniels that the repair you made isn't likely to hold. And the containment dome is going to be too hot for Alex or me to re-enter for many years. We need a good reactor tech here. Someone who isn't affected by hard rads."

She smiled broadly, the china-white of her teeth brightening the room. "I was thinking the same thing. If we can get Daniels to put his chop on your report, my boss might agree."

"Why would he give you up?"

She laughed. "That asshole hates my guts; he'd been looking for a way to get rid of me for months. My only regret is that I won't be able work with this old engineer I used to shack up with. But he'll understand."

"Well, after I get done with my report, nobody will dare pull you off this rock. Hell, you can ride it into the sun if that's your pleasure."

"Anything except to go home, my friend," Vera said as she hugged him gently, "anything at all."

Chapter Nine

Apartment block next to the commercial sector

It was high noon when a man in his forties and a young woman in her early twenties sat down in a darkened room to watch a hologram. The images that surrounded them were all of Vera, recorded when she'd first stepped out of the spaceport and walked uncertainly into the living areas of the asteroid. Taken from a series of surveillance cameras, they showed her floating down a flight of stairs to stumble awkwardly at the bottom.

"The holo confirms it, Zarla. She's Velorian, but hardly a Protector. My guess would be B-class and, based on her lack of coordination, this is her first time off Velor."

Zarla sat motionless in front of the holo as it switched to a view of the maintenance shop at the reactor. She watched the blonde woman carrying two heavy sections of pipe, one over each shoulder, before turning to look up at the man who was her father, her crystalline eyes wide in wonder. "She's incredibly strong. Those pipes must each weigh a good part of a ton."

Her father nodded. "A B-class Vel's main weapons are ordinarily her power of levitation and heat vision. But this woman's unusually muscular, so I'm guessing she's significantly stronger than normal. But hardly in your class."

"I don't want to fight her, father. Innocents could be killed."

"Don't worry, I've got a battle plan that doesn't involve your dealing directly with her. Instead, we'll give that task to the local authorities. The Enforcers to be exact."

"Why should they take her on? She came to help. At their invitation."

"If she commits a capital crime, she'll have to comply with local law enforcement or they'll send a Protector to compel her."

Zarla looked back at the holo and shuddered. "A capital crime? Why would she do that?"

"She won't. But everyone will think she has."

Zarla felt another chill trace up her back as she guessed where this discussion was heading.

"I'm in medical school now, father, almost a Healer. I don't know anything about battling the Pales."

Her father turned up the lights as the holo image evaporated. "We all have our obligations in this life, Zarla, and your donor's legacy lives in you. Rumors are that the Velorian intends to stay on Corridor. That would compromise our mission."

Zarla glared at her father. "Our mission? Legacies? I thought we came here to avoid all that."

"Life is never that simple, my dear," Daglon Sophrant sighed, "but it is true that I was looking for a different life after your mother died. This assignment as a merchant, living undercover along the fringes of the Enlightenment, was the best location I could wrangle out of Command. No Velorians present, at least until now, only Terrans, and the Virtual University here was first rate."

"Isn't that enough?"

"It was until today. But I have a responsibility to keep Corridor from falling too far into the grasp of the Enlightenment. To keep the miners suspicious of authority and independent. If they became familiar with this Vel, even going so far as to get involved with her, she could use that to reel them in."

Zarla said nothing. She couldn't tell her father how much she hated attending medical school with classmates who were merely holograms constructed from periodically transmitted data-traces of her classmates, the data from the Virtual University feeding into an artificial intelligence which gave their images life. She couldn't tell him how much she missed Earth. Most importantly, she couldn't tell him that she'd joined the underground. That her highest goal was to end the war that had become his life.

It could be worse, she told herself. The VU at least allowed students spread across the Galaxy to interact and learn in an environment that was visually and audibly realistic, yet frustratingly, filled with images that dissolved when touched. Still, it was a huge step forward from the old-fashioned correspondence studies, and the VU could grant a medical degree before she traveled to an Empire world to begin her internship. There could be no substitute for real patients when her clinical studies began. Aurean patients.

She was 21 years old and, remarkably, had just finished her second year of medical school, a full four years ahead of most other students. Her teachers and professors – their virtual avatars, anyway – said she was gifted. In reality, she knew it was mostly hard work. After her six hours a day of classes, she studied for another fourteen, sleeping a bare four hours a night. That was enough for someone with her genetic gifts, but it left no time for anything else.

"I promise you, honey," her father continued, "there will be no danger of your confronting the Vel. We'll get at her through her associates."

Zarla sighed resignedly, and asked, "What do I have to do?" She knew that once her father had made up his mind, there was no turning him aside, and she was already losing time on her day's studies.

Her father was a decorated Intel officer who'd served in the Aurean Empire's Near Earth Command, and Zarla grown up on that wondrous yet dangerous world before her mother was killed in battle there. And while they might be living a long ways from the front lines now, her father's commission – like those of all Aurean officers – ended only with his death.

Still, she didn't regret the opportunities to travel that had come with his career. Those years of growing up on Earth had been her favorite time. On the surface, the family had lived an ordinary American life in the city of Atlanta. Her father had been a scouting coach for the local professional football team, and her mother had been a model, two jobs which made Zarla's unusual beauty and extreme fitness believable to the Terrans.

She'd started modeling herself for children's clothing catalogs at age 10, and her career had culminated with a spectacularly popular pictorial for *Playboy* that had been shot on her 18th birthday. Her father had been proud of both her accomplishments. A picture from her centerfold portfolio, one that he liked because it emphasized her Aurean perfection, still hung on the wall of their home.

He'd once told her that he wondered what *Playboy* would think if it knew the centerfold of their annual NFL fall kickoff issue was blessed with the strength of the combined starting roster of the National Football League. And then ten times over. She thought that was a little weird herself.

Zarla had grown up the last few years without her mother's influence, for Earth was the place where the Empire's iron will had broken down. Instead of conquering that world as they'd done to so many others, the many fragmented voices inside the Imperial Senate had endlessly debated the risks of open conflict with the Enlightenment and fears of Galen intervention. That hesitancy, and the resulting subterfuge that characterized the Near Earth mission, had led to her mother's death only months after Zarla's 18th birthday. She hadn't celebrated a birthday since.

It wasn't long after Mother's death that her father learned that the Velorian shapechanger named Cat had been her assassin. It took him several long months after that to convince Command to send the first Destroyer to Earth. The Velorian doppelganger had died during the resulting fight, but unfortunately, so had the secrecy surrounding the Destroyer's abilities. Command began an investigation and the stink landed on her father for pursuing his personal agenda of revenge. He'd quickly been recalled to Aurea, and from there, sent to this desolate asteroid colony, supposedly as punishment.

In reality, it was exactly the assignment he'd wanted. A safe place for Zarla to grow up, free of the struggle between Velorian and Aurean. He knew Zarla saw it otherwise... she talked about Corridor as if it were a prison. The only consolation he could offer her were the dozens of Aureans among her classmates at the VU, all virtual of course, and a couple of real human girlfriends, neither of whom had a hint that he was Aurean military. Or that Zarla was what the Empire called a Kella'prime.

Zarla had grown up gentle and caring, traits that few humans would expect of an Aurean. The Enlightenment propaganda had worked overtime to depict Aureans as bloodthirsty brutes, intent on the death of anyone human or Velorian. That same propaganda worked to Zarla and her father's favor by allowing her to pass for human, despite her obvious genetic gifts. Women's hearts went out to Daglon for raising his beautiful daughter alone, a top student no less. Young men connived ways to meet her, but Zarla was always too aloof to be caught.

After her mother's violent death, Zarla's one goal in life had become that of caring for the sick and injured. To be a Healer. The very last thing she wanted was to become a Fal'Allure operative like her mother or a soldier like her father. She'd begun to trade secret messages with a group of fellow students on Aurea who were part of Paix, an underground peace group that wanted to put an end to conquest and war.

Unfortunately, now that the Velorian had arrived on Corridor, her father had slipped back into his old role as a soldier. He was pacing around the room, spouting plans and counter-plans. "We simply cannot allow the Pale to stay here," was the gist of it.

Zarla shrugged. "Won't her own people come and retrieve her? I thought only Protectors were allowed to live off of Velor."

"She's worked out some deal with Daniels, convincing him that she has to stay here to monitor and repair the damaged reactor for the next ten years. Even if Velor doesn't agree, I don't think they'll go to the trouble of trying to get her back."

"So, you're saying we have to get rid of her ourselves, is that it?"

"Exactly," he said with a loud snap of his fingers, "and we have to do it in a way that will keep our secrets intact." He paused to stare into Zarla's eyes, a sudden look of wild genius in his face. "What's the one thing that everyone knows about Vels?"

Zarla shrugged again. "Their strength?"

"Of course. But think beyond that."

"Their oversized libidos?" she snickered.

"Yes!" he said loudly. "We've all seen those exploitive holo shows, the soap operas that make them look like oversexed Lolos. And then there are those jokes about what would happen if a man had sex with one of them. How they'd fuck a man to death."

Zarla's skin turned darker. She wasn't used to hearing her father talk like this. But she knew what he was referring to. She and her friend Carla had watched some pornos that she'd sneaked from her father's library, and one of them had been a reenactment of a fight between an Aurean and a Velorian. She'd been excited and horrified at the same time as she watched the Velorian actress subdue her male opponent in the most sexual of ways.

That wasn't the kind of sex she dreamed about. Her dreams were filled instead with fragrant flowers and soft lights and delicate touches. Mumbled words of love, not grunts and screams.

"What I need you to do is to make one of those jokes come true, Zarla, and lay the blame on the Velorian."

Zarla gasped open-mouthed at her father, wondering for a moment if he could read her darkest thoughts. "What... what did you say?" she asked in a shocked voice.

Daglon Sophrant paused to stare at his daughter, his eyes turning a colder shade of blue. His heart felt frozen as his long-suppressed rage against anyone Velorian filled his veins again, his duty as an Aurean officer overriding even the compassion he felt for his daughter. He listened to his own voice as if it were a stranger's. "Approach one of the men the Velorian is working with and seduce him, then kill him in a way that everyone will assume was due to the Velorian's sexual athletics."

"Father! I won't... I mean, I can't..."

"Of course you can, Zarla. Your genetic donor was from a warrior clan, and you are your mother's daughter," Daglon said in the crisp, commanding tones of a soldier of Aurea. "You are also my daughter. It is time to remember your heritage."

Zarla burst into tears and fled the room, running from the horror she'd worked so hard to forget.

Chapter Ten

Zarla lay in her bed late that night, staring at the ceiling, her body seething with anger. She'd returned to argue with her father for hours, but he'd talked to her like a stranger. She hated the changes that had come over him since the Velorian had arrived.

All their talk about escaping the spiraling violence between Empire and Enlightenment seemed like a lie now. As soon as he was faced with one of the enemy, he'd fallen back into a blind rage, his thoughts only of attack.

She searched her own thoughts, trying to understand what drove this side of her father. Was he still driven out of a sense of love lost? Nothing else made any sense, for he'd wanted to escape the violence of the Empire as much as she had.

She tried to sleep, but her dreams became nightmares. In them, she felt her own heart growing as cold as her father's, even as her eyes blazed forth with enough power to vaporize anything in her path. She raged in her dream, killing everyone, all the while blaming the coldness of her heart on the Velorian.

If only she hadn't come....

Her anger faded as she woke up. Rising, she was filled with doubt, and wondered if her lack of desire for revenge meant that her love for her mother had faded? Was that a failing of hers, or just part of the process of moving on? Had her loyalty for her own people faded as well?

No, she thought determinedly as she remembered the way her father had talked about how the Empire was trying to save humanity. She couldn't accept that. She wouldn't. The Empire might behave excessively at times, but a strong defense and law and order were the only ways to keep humanity united. Every Aurean knew that. The Velorians were agents of chaos, spreading concepts of free will and self-determination that were no more than blonde excuses for anarchy.

Her doubts quickly crystallized into her usual determination to help fix whatever was wrong, and by the time the artificial sun came on, sending long, slanting shafts of reddish-blue light through her window, she knew she was going to fulfill her father's request. It was at worst the lesser of two evils to aid the Aurean cause. As much as she wished it otherwise, she knew she had to approach this terrible task as she'd approached everything else in her life. She would simply do it better than anyone else could.

She swung her long legs over the side of the bed and reached for her PersComp. Her father had given her the names of two men, both engineers at the power station. She studied their bios and pictures, and finally decided that her target was going to be Alex Cordon. She'd had an unpleasant run in with him a year ago when she was trying to organize a field trip to the power station. She smiled ironically to herself, realizing that he was now going to pay for pissing off an Aurean. That uncharacteristic thought scared her, sobering her as well. She had always considered arrogance as one of the original sins.

Unfortunately, thinking too much made it all that much harder to get her head into the whole assassin thing. Her only consolation was that she could go back to her studies as soon as the Velorian was gone. Perhaps she could forget it had even happened. Put up a mental block or something. Her mother had always done that.

She began rummaging through her closet until she found a brown leather skirt that looked right for the situation, the waist low and hem teasingly short. She tried on a button-up white and red-striped top that left a touch of her midriff bare. The white fabric was translucent in Aurean fashion. The outfit had belonged to her mother, and it was distinctly more provocative than her usual jeans and t-shirt attire. It would work.

She put on some music and danced barefoot across her bedroom as she brushed her hair out, the glowing highlights of red and brown the giveaways that marked her as being a Kella'Prime. Her family's genetics were Betan, but both her parents had been enhanced by

modified retrovirus from a donor Prime before she was conceived. Her conception had further been in-vitro, and it was said that there were some Galen genes in the mix, accounting for the lighter hair.

She brushed her hair over one eye and stared at herself in the mirror, deciding that she looked both sexy enough and dangerous enough in this outfit to do the job. Walking out of her bedroom, she flipped herself over the railing that circled the living area of their home and landed catlike on the marble floor three stories below.

Daglon looked up and smiled at his daughter as he poured a cup of Andros tea. He whistled appreciatively. "You look just like your mother did when she was your age, honey."

Despite the horrors that this day would most likely bring her, that thought made Zarla feel strangely proud. "I guess blood is thicker than politics after all, father."

Daglon grinned as he watched his daughter look up Alex's number in her PersComp. She punched him up on the holo-vid. He stepped out of the field of view as the speaker buzzed, and a life-sized image of Alex Cordon appeared in the corner of the kitchen. He looked as real as if he was truly standing there, as Zarla did in his home.

"Zarla Sophrant? I'm surprised you're calling."

Alex wasn't one for pleasantries, although the way his eyes flicked up and down her body said he was appreciative of her outfit. He'd must have forgotten that he'd gotten on her wrong side about the field trip, or maybe he hadn't even noticed.

She forced herself to smile warmly. "I need your help, Alex. I've got a project at school dealing with the physiological affects of radioactive suppression of white blood cells, and I know you nuclear engineers have a lot of training in that area."

He didn't return her smile. "Not a good time, Zarla. We've had a major malfunction at the station."

"I gathered, what with the Vel here."

"She's an idiot," he frowned. "But Calen thinks she can keep control of the core. If not, we're all going to have to abandon this place in a few more days."

Zarla blinked. She hadn't heard anything that suggested the situation was that dire. "I only need a few minutes to interview you. Can you meet me near the ventilation portal over by Strangelove's. Number 93 I think it is."

Alex looked at her strangely. Everyone knew about Portal 93. It was the place kids went to make out. No surveillance cameras were focused in that area. "That's on my way to work. And yeah, 93 is closest to Strange's."

Zarla tossed her head, her hair flowing silkily as she smiled suggestively. "I'll make it worth your while, Alex. I have to get this done by tonight or I'm going to fail. You're my only hope. I'll do anything to get through this class."

His eyebrow raised for a brief second, but his expression otherwise remained unchanged as he glanced down at the clock. Then he consulted his PersComp. "O.K. I can give you a half hour. No more."

"Thanks, Alex," she said sweetly. "And hey, maybe if we have to evacuate, we could travel together in one of those two-person pods."

He looked blankly at her as he pushed the button to end his transmission.

"He's a bit stiff, isn't he," Daglon observed from his corner of the kitchen.

"He's an asshole," Zarla said sourly while spinning around on her heel. "Which is why I chose him. No loss if he exits the ranks of the living."

He smiled. "Thinking like an Aurean warrior already, aren't you?"

Chapter Eleven

Strangelove's, Portal 93

The moving walkway from the commercial section to the portals carried Zarla at breakneck speed.

"Thinking like an Aurean warrior," she said under her breath, her father's words echoed in her mind, and the pain of them almost caused her to lose her will. She was determined that she would become a Healer, not a killer. Or would she? A worrisome thought nagged at her. Wasn't there supposed to be some kind of Rites when a warrior completed their first kill? A new middle name added. Zarla fal Sophrant. The middle name being the Aurean word for mortality. She cursed under her breath. Whatever happened this day, she was determined that she'd never carry that name.

She arrived at Portal 93 well ahead of Alex. Taking out a small vial of Primal pheromones that she'd found in her mother's things years ago, she held her breath as she undid half the buttons of her top and dabbed some of the flowery, honey-scented oil between her breasts. When she took her next breath, the warmth of her bosom seemed to fill the air around her with an invisible cloud of pure desire, the honey and wildflower scent sending a wild flurry of tingles through her body like an electric shock. She desperately hoped they would work well enough on Alex to simplify her Fal'Allure – the so-called Death during Seduction. Fal'Allure had been her mother's stock in trade, as it was for most female Aurean warriors.

She felt warm and tingly and more than a bit turned on as she stood with her back against the rock wall, watching Alex step off the tube to walk her way. Her nipples started to burn as she inhaled more of the pheromone, tenting the translucent fabric of her top. She desperately hoped that her look, not to mention her scent, would have the right effect on the young engineer. She had a few sentences of sweet talk prepared, but after that, she couldn't think of anything she wanted to say to him.

"So, what is it you needed again?" Alex asked arrogantly as he walked over to face her, his disdain for those less academically accomplished, let alone female, clear in his words.

Zarla ignored his attitude as she watched his eyes flitting up and down her body, pausing to stare at breasts and nipples that were too firm for someone merely human. But he was arrogant and he was a human male, and that made him weak and susceptible to her borrowed pheromones. He would think her excitement was his doing.

She stepped closer, reaching her hand out to rest her fingers gently on his arm, hoping he'd catch a whiff of the scent. "Just what I've wanted every day since we met last year, Alex. You impressed me, especially the way you didn't need anyone to help you, no matter how difficult the challenge. The way you were so strong, so independent, so smart."

"I don't understa..."

"Sure you do," she purred. "It's so sexy when a man is strong that way. Other men become shy, daunted by my beauty, desiring my body, but too intimidated to even talk to me. But you act as if you don't care. That makes you a challenge. More than any man on Corridor, I want you." She cringed as the lies flowed so easily from her lips.

"But we didn't get along at all," Alex said, a funny smile twisting his face. "I treated you like shit. And that turns you on?"

"More than you can imagine," she breathed.



Alex smiled broadly now, sensing that his very private dream of finding a woman who truly appreciated his brilliance had finally come true. A woman who knew that intelligence and confidence were the sexiest traits any man could possess. The softness of silly emotions was a crutch that lesser men used to prop up their fragile intellects. He had no use for them. "You are very beautiful, Zarla. I've long thought that you were the one woman here who was worthy of me."

"Then we have both suppressed our feelings too long," she said sexily, moving closer, the warmth of her body radiating her borrowed scent. "I've saved myself all this time for you. So we can finally say and do what we've always wanted to."

"Right here? Now?" His arrogant smile faded slightly as a part of his mind reminded him of his inexperience. Women had always pushed him away. He ignored that misplaced doubt as yet another thought crossed his mind: would he be as naturally brilliant in sex as he was in engineering?

Zarla licked her lips and leaned close, brushing her hair softly across his cheek, long hair falling over his shoulder, her warm, fragrant breath teasing his lips.

His mouth was foul with morning breath, the smell making her want to throw up. She prayed that her borrowed pheromones would start working on him – and soon. She wasn't sure she'd have the will power to actually kiss him. "Yes, Alex. Right here. I want to share something with you that I have given to no other man. "

His confidence rushed back to pump up his usual arrogance. Convinced by her admission of virginity, he knew now that she would not judge him wanting. It was only this location that bothered him. Sex belonged in a bed. "I'm not so sure... someone could come..."

"And nothing," Zarla purred as she ran her fingers through his hair, trying to emulate the loving touches she'd seen on the holos. For she truly was the virgin she admitted to being.

He inhaled deeply, and his eyes opened wide as the alien chemistry finally found its way to his center. He seemingly came unglued, wrapping his arms around and kissing her fiercely, holding her tightly enough to have bruised an ordinary woman. His heart was pounding so loudly that she could hear the surge of blood in his veins. He reached down and crudely tore her top the rest of the way open. She gasped, turned on despite herself by his aggressiveness, and by the way his eyes opened wide in wonder as he stared down at her.

Finally, the damned pheromones were working!

She began to draw upon the exercises she'd worked so hard at years before. When she was 16, her mother had started her on a training program that had, at first, seemed impossibly embarrassing... the art of loving. More specifically, the art of loving a fragile human male. It was something any Supremis could learn, her mother had said, but not without practice. The training involved self-hypnosis and a number of fruits and vegetables. More than a few tubers had subsequently been sacrificed to Zarla's training, but her mother had insisted she get it right. She said that living on Earth, with her only friends humans, would someday require such a skill.

Zarla was grateful now for her mother's foresight, for even if this wasn't Earth, Alex was human enough. She deepened her own kisses, her tongue finding the warmth of his, sending a riot of tingles through both their bodies. His lack of hygiene no longer seemed important as she intensified her own excitement by reaching down to undo his belt, then quickly unzipped his pants in one smooth movement. She'd never undressed a man before, but it felt strangely natural. She found his growing erection, and her fingers closing tightly around him to elicit a strangled groan of pleasure from deep in his throat.

Her first thought was that he was terribly small. It took her a moment to realize that the porn she and her girlfriends had giggled over had featured exceptional men. Enhanced ones probably, given that genetic manipulation had first been employed to fulfill the expansive dreams of men back in the second decade of 21st century Earth. All that spam email and those late-night infomercials had finally lived up to their promise. Unfortunately, Alex hadn't been a buyer. Still, his pulse throbbed intriguingly in her hand, hot and demanding, and his passionate kisses sent a strange thrill coursing through her body.

She tightened her grip further, moving past human strength, and Alex's gasping moans took on a sharper edge of pain. She quickly realized her mistake, and relaxed her hand, moving it gently along his length. She hiked her already short skirt up with her other hand before leaping upward to wrap her legs around his hips, letting him support her weight. She pushed his head down into her dramatic cleavage and encouraged him to breathe deeply of her borrowed scent.

Alex staggered under her unexpected weight and nearly lost his balance. She leaned back to encourage him to slam her back up against the jagged rock wall. Growling feral-like as her Aurean desires grew, her body tingling wildly in response to his passion, an irresistible need began to grow inside her, making her very wet, creating an aching desire to feel him inside her. Remembering her training, she reaching out to dig her fingers into cracks in the rock wall, supporting her own weight as she carefully directed her strength away from him. Imagining that she was as soft and delicate as a human girl, she tried to lower herself over him. Frustratingly, he bent and couldn't enter her tightness. She reached down with one hand to hold his erection, larger now, and guided him more accurately as she closed her eyes and imagined him inside her. Hoisting herself higher with her other hand, she traced her kisses wildly across his face, finding his lips yet again, hoping to lose herself in passion.

It still wasn't good enough.

Desperate now, she imagined that Alex was one of her classmates, particularly that cute guy with the curly hair on Aurea who shared her class. That worked, sending a further gush of wetness and a riot of indescribable tingling desire through her body. She opened her thighs wide, so wet and slippery now, and finally felt him slipping past the guardians of her virginity.

"Oh, yeah, baby..." Alex gasped as he thrust himself upward, impaling her against the rock wall with all his strength, burying himself in her slippery warmth. Her pheromones had energized his body, invoking an adrenal response that made him pant and groan like a mating gorilla as he began thrusting into her hard enough to have injured an ordinary girl. His desire was primal, so raw and so hot that what was left of his hostility toward her turned into a desire to subdue her passion with the power of his own. To lord his male power over her.

Zarla cried out in genuine passion as she discovered for the first time the indescribable pleasures of a man's loving. Of feeling his passion inside herself.

Between her rush of unexpected desire and her very physical seduction, not to mention her pheromones, Alex lost it in seconds. He cried out hoarsely and threw himself against her a last time, his body seemingly exploding from inside out.

His hoarse shout of release was clamped off in mid-stream as Zarla seized that moment to tighten her legs around him with incredible strength, her heels digging into his backside as she instinctively wanted more from him than he could give.

Shocked by her incredible strength, Alex cried out as a wave of pain radiated upward from where her protruding pubic bone ground into the sensitive flesh just above his erection, her labia closing tightly around his base to keep him rock hard. The unexpected pressure sent

his blood pressure soaring, threatening to blow the top of his head off, and a wave of panic suddenly filled him as he instinctually realized that something was horribly wrong.

No girl could be this strong!

He screamed and tore at Zarla's hair and flesh as her body tightened even more painfully around his, making him feel as if it was caught in one of the rock crushers down on level 12. He smashed his forehead against hers and began to punch at her, part of his brain instinctively realizing, impossibly, that he was engaged in a fight for his life. He cursed as he saw it all too clearly now.

Her crystalline eyes should have been a giveaway. If not that, then the dangerous beauty that came from her perfect fitness and flawless skin.

He'd let himself get drawn into a fight with a Supremis!

Gasping in pain, he felt her arms and legs constricting around him like steel bands, and in that horrible moment of perfect awareness, he knew he was going to die.

Zarla pushed her passion forward even as Alex's own turned to terror but, frustratingly, she felt her desires retreating as she tasted the sourness of his fear, a stench of panic rising from his sweaty skin. She was suddenly filled with anger, not at Alex, but at the Velorian. She was the one who was making her feel this way, making her betray a Healer's vow to do no harm. Her anger sent the warrior impulses encoded in her genes racing, filling her with hateful desire, her thoughts and emotions swirling from one extreme to another. Most of all, she was disgusted to feel his erection softening inside her, and something clicked in her head, an impulse as cruel as that of a cat playing with a doomed mouse. She suddenly wanted to savor the sensation of killing this man, of pouring all her anger into his death.

Slowly and deliberately, she began to steadily and inexorably tighten her arms and legs. The soft, delicate curves of her girlish body turned to striated muscles, even the microscopic muscles in her skin contracting to make her breasts as hard as steel, and her nipples into diamond spears. She stared into his terrified eyes as she sensed the mortal fear that filled his soul as he struggled futilely against her fantastic strength. She hugged him ever tighter, the curve of her protruding breasts bending his ribs apart as his lungs emptied in a final gasping scream of futility.

She screamed for both of them now as she tightened her most powerful muscles, her long legs wrapped around him python-like, and the satisfying wet, crunching sound of his shattering pelvis made her smile wickedly. She proudly thrust her chest forward, and was rewarded with the brittle snap of his ribs reverberating through the drum tightness of her chest. She held him to her until she felt his shoulder blades pulverizing, trapped between her breasts and her firm grip on his shoulder blades. Caught in her embrace of steel, his remaining ribs collapsed like a baby bird in a child's cruel grip. His heart fluttered for a few long seconds, and then fell terrifyingly still.

Unfortunately, the rush of passion that had blinded Zarla to the consequences of what she had done began to fade with his heartbeat. She blinked her eyes wide-open, surfacing from the depths of her misplaced lust, only to be horrified as she felt Alex's shattered bones grinding inside his chest. Suddenly nauseous, she pushed his body away so hard that it splattered bloodily against the inner wall of the portal. The sight of his crushed and torn flesh became too much for her, and she held her hand over her mouth as she turned to run through a line of boulders along the wall of the cavern.

She paused after a few steps to vomit, her stomach turning itself inside out as she fell to her knees. When the gagging subsided, she struggled back to her feet, blinded by her tears, running away to escape the horrible shame of having killed such a helpless creature.

Chapter Twelve

Daglon watched his daughter run away, his heart in his throat, a part of him so proud that she'd risen to the necessary demand of killing the human, even as another part of him was sad that he'd forced her to betray her ideals.

He had once enjoyed the perversity of watching his wife's slow, erotic destruction of the men that Command had sanctioned, a perversity that turned into athletic passion as he later proved to her that he could not be injured the same way. But he took no pleasure in Zarla's distress. He knew what she needed to dampen the fires of passion and find her center again, but as he was the only man with the power to do so, and he was her father, she would have to find her peace another way.

It had been so much simpler on Earth. They had been fighting a war, the boundaries clearly established. He'd worked as a drug dealer in addition to his scouting job, encouraging his wife, Arla, and her friends to slip deeply into the spiral of sex and drugs that followed many models around on Earth. Knowing that no drug could truly addict a Kella'prime or harm her physically, even though Arla became intoxicated like the other women, he helped his wife draw in the older men, men with more money and power than good sense, as they pursued the beautiful, young women who were hungry for their slice of the good life.

He lubricated Arla's debauchery with his illegal drugs, and in so doing, his wife gained useful contacts in the entertainment industry and in Washington itself. Nearly everyone who was anyone had exploited his wife's body between the white sheets of five-star hotels. That part of her life had quickly become a swirl of seduction and assassination, both of them conducted in the same beds. A model, a whore, sometimes his wife, but always, an agent of the Empire.

Yet for all of that, Arla had always been able to separate herself from that world. Coming home, sometimes only minutes after a lethal seduction, she'd been a caring mother to Zarla. In their friends' eyes, Arla and Daglon were a caring couple raising their beautiful daughter in the upper middle class suburbs of Atlanta.

It was so different now, living on this asteroid and trying to raise Zarla alone. His daughter was inexperienced and naive, a compassionate girl, yet she'd done her job competently enough today. Daglon's only regret was that she'd briefly let the young engineer take the initiative. He'd found that very uncomfortable to watch as a father. Fortunately, Zarla had quickly regained control to dispatch him with Aurean efficiency.

For not the first time, Daglon regretted ever agreeing to undergo the enhancement program with Arla. The two of them had been so naive when they were approached by the scientists from GenTech Command. But at first, the StarChild program had sounded like a dream come true.

He and Arla would be enhanced by a female Prime, giving them ten times their current physical abilities. Their children would subsequently be born to even greater power, their strength intermediate between a lowly Betan and a mighty Prime. Even more remarkably,

assuming Kella'prime offspring from the same generation married each other, the third generation of such racial purity would become the physical equals of the original Primes.

If that same selective breeding were carried out on a global scale, the distinction between Prime and Betan would evaporate and all Aureans would be united as equals. Betans had long embraced that dream, going back over two hundred years to the origin of the Kella'prime program. Yet strictly controlled under penalty of death, it was only in the last twenty years that such enhancement had become a reality for thousands of families.

But now he wasn't so sure it wasn't a nightmare in disguise. He had just used his daughter to start the process of ridding Corridor of the Velorian, an admirable enough task, but where would it end? Clearly if he was willing to use his own daughter this way, the Empire would have even more terrible tasks for her. The Empire would someday have a vast army of such warriors who would conquer and kill anyone who did not submit to the Emperor's rule.

Daglon felt the seeds of self-doubt growing in his heart, twisting the long-held dream of Betan destiny into another horror, once again orchestrated by the evil Primes.

Chapter Thirteen

The Reactor spaces

Vera and Calen worked feverishly to design and fabricate an armored airlock door and decontamination chamber that could be set into the now repaired main entrance to the containment dome. The extensive decontamination of her body after her first exposure had taken half a day, and then another day to clean up the maintenance area. It was barely within tolerable limits for humans even now. With an airlock, Vera could come and go without further contaminating the outside maintenance area.

By late afternoon, they had the airlock working, courtesy of Calen's design talents and Vera's ability to work the thick steel with little more than her strong hands and blazing eyes. Much like a Terran sculptor working his clay, she displayed an artistic touch with stainless steel.

Daniels had watched her go about her work for a few minutes, then headed back to his office, muttering something about never, ever shaking hands with a Velorian. Or making eye contact. He hadn't returned, which was unusual enough in itself.

Things grew even stranger when Alex didn't show up for work or call. Calen was starting to worry about him when two heavily armored Guardians walked into the maintenance area. Vera had her back to them as she smoothed the welds around the airlock, using a combination of heat vision and her thumbs, finally rubbing the glowing steel out with her palms until it was polished smooth.

One of the Guardians motioned for Calen to be quiet as his partner walked stealthily up behind Vera, holding a thick horseshoe of golden metal in front of him. He paused just behind her as she concentrated on her work, the loud exhaust fans covering the sound of his breathing and heartbeat. He tensed himself, and suddenly leaned forward to wrap the gold band around her waist. It snapped closed with a buzzing click, and Vera staggered, slowly turning back to look at the Guardian and then Calen, her eyes narrowing with a look of betrayal.

"What the hell are you..." Calen started to protest, only to have the other Guardian bend him over a table, fastening his wrists tightly with a plastic strap.

The second Guardian snapped a thick pair of handcuffs made of purplish metal to bind Vera's wrists together the same way, then jerked her back to her feet, clearing his throat to announce, "Vera Sho'tovic, I bind you in law."

"What!" Calen shouted at them. "She just saved our collective asses, you idiots. If the reactor malfunctions again, we could die within hours."

"Orders," the Guardian said as he began to wind layers of gold chain around her neck.

Vera looked up the Guardian with smoky eyes, a funny grin on her face. She looked completely out of it now; intoxicated and dreamy-eyed. The air was filled with the scent of her pheromones, a wild tingle of arousal tearing at Calen with passionate power, yet the two Guardians seemed unaffected as they struggled to get her on back on her feet and walk her out of the room. Vera staggered drunkenly between them. Then he saw the filters in their noses and understood. They'd clearly been quickly but thoroughly trained in the art of subduing an empowered Velorian.

One of the Guardians looked back at Calen as he collapsed in his chair, gasped for air, seemingly on the edge of embarrassing himself horribly. The Guardian smirked, "You need to come down to the station for questioning as well, just as soon as you are... capable."

Chapter Fourteen

Calen sat in the Security office a half hour later, handcuffs removed, asking a stream of questions that the investigating officer was unwilling or unable to answer.

Then a detective named Vance Calloway arrived and began grilling him, mostly about Vera. Calloway smoked a smelly pipe and had a huge moustache, two anachronisms Calen figured would be tolerated only on an "anything goes" mining world like Corridor. The man's questions began to focus in on how Vera had gotten along with Alex.

Calen answered his questions as carefully as he could, but there was no disguising that Alex and Vera hadn't gotten along well at all. A mutual lack of respect was how he described it. As he talked, Calen kept glancing at Vera as she lay on the cot in her cell, moaning softly. Was gold that powerful a drug for Velorians?

Normally, no jail cell could hold a Velorian, everyone knew that. She could easily tear the handcuffs apart and then bend the cell bars outward to escape. Instead, she looked weak and intoxicated, her hair falling over her face as she leaned her head against the wall and moaned softly.

Calloway saw him glancing at her. "Gold does that if it's pure enough and there's enough of it. A series of unbroken bands around a Vel's body confuses the hormones that regulate energy flows. Makes them feel drunk, horny and nearly as weak as a human if you can get enough of it on. The only danger now is the cloud of pheromones she's giving off. We can only vent so much of that outside the cell."

Calen had heard about that, though usually in a bawdy sexual context, but now he had first-hand experience. Supremis pheromones were the ultimate aphrodisiac for humans and Supremis alike. Calloway paused to describe how gold was a catalyst for them, referring to it as part of some Galen plan that he didn't understand.

"What I do understand is that the closed atmosphere of this rock is going to make the docs busy about nine months from now," he quipped. Then added, "That's a joke, son."

Calen shook his head and shifted mental gears, realizing that Calloway's earlier questions had been focused on Vera's interactions with Alex. "I was wondering what happened to, Alex. He didn't show up for work today. He and I signed on together."

Calloway's expression turned dark. "You don't want to know, son. Trust me on this."

"Actually, I do," Calen said, his sense of foreboding increasing.

"You're going to regret it."

"That's for me to decide."

Calloway paused to look up into Calen's face, and finally shrugged. "Guess you have as much right to know about your friend as anyone. Follow me."

Calloway led the way down two flights of metal stairs and through a doorway into a darkened room with a medical examination table in the middle. The air had a musky, slightly rotten smell that even the strong scent of disinfectant couldn't quite hide.

Calen's heart froze as he suddenly realized he was standing in a morgue. "You mean... Alex is dead?"

Calloway pulled open one of the long drawers and lifted the metalized sheet that covered a body. Calen covered his mouth as he stared down at his friend. Or what was left of his friend. Alex's body had been crushed down, his shoulders bent inward, sharp protrusions of broken bone pressing up under the skin of his chest and arms, his pelvis as narrow as a young child's and badly distorted.

"No bruising despite the massive internal injuries. She killed him fast."

"She?"

"Your girlfriend."

"Vera?" Calen gasped, finally understanding with a shock why they'd taken her into custody. "No way. She couldn't have done this."

"You know anyone else on Corridor that could crush a man like that? Look at his chest, those two rounded depressions where his ribs were crushed? I've seen pictures of someone who was killed by a female Prime. Same pattern, using her fucking supertits against ordinary frail flesh."

"A Prime, maybe, but Vera's Velorian. She wouldn't hurt anyone."

"Her boss back on Velor knew better, had the Proctors send her file with the ship. Seems she once hung out with a B-class gang, the kind of assholes that robbed and cheated people and busted up anyone who complained. Her boyfriend had been killed by another B-class low-lives they were peddling sex stimulants to." He looked back up at Calen. "She's hardly a sweet young thing."

"You find any record saying she's ever hurt anyone?" Calen challenged.

"You mean other than the guy who killed her boyfriend? She fucked him to death, Aurean style. Broke his back. See any pattern here?"

"That's bullshit," Calen shouted back. "She didn't do this." Everything he'd learned about Vera in the last few days told him she was willing to risk her own life to help others. She might have lived a rough life on Velor, but in her heart, he knew she was true to the highest ideals of Velor.

"O.K, maybe not intentionally," Calloway shrugged, not wanting to upset Calen further. "Could be the bitch was just having her way with him and lost control. Death by passion. Manslaughter or murder, either way she's going back to Velor for trial."

Calen stared at Alex's misshapen body. He looked like he'd been run over by a ground truck. This was no accident. But how could anyone kill a man so cruelly?

Calloway answered his unasked question. "The bitch broke every bone from his pelvis up, and the sharp ends and slivers in turn slashed his internal organs apart. Not only that, but they were fucking at the time. Nobody but a Vel has enough inner strength to kill a man that way. "

"Nobody but a Prime," Calen reminded him darkly.

Calloway shook his head. "We'd know if one of those bastards was on the rock. Scanners can pick 'em up. Showed your Vel clear as day soon as she landed."

"You can track her movements then? Since she arrived?"

"Could if we'd wanted to. But we normally just check new arrivals. Trust me, son, she killed your friend."

"What about a Betan? Can you track them?"

Calloway shook his head. "Not that it matters. There's no way one of them is strong enough to do this kind of damage. Nope, as I see it, this an open-and-shut case if there ever was one. "

"Would it make a difference if I told you she was with me last night, and all day today."

"You're sure you had your eye on her every minute? You didn't sleep, go to the bathroom, nothing?"

"Well, no, I mean, yeah, I kind of passed out. But she's been with me every minute since I woke up around seven this morning."

"Well, that doesn't help. Your buddy got crunched at about six. I suspect you're lucky to be alive, son. You had to be next on her list."

"No, I don't buy any of this," Calen said angrily. "She wanted more than anything to stay here on Corridor, and she's smart enough to know that killing someone this way would point only to her."

"As I said, maybe she didn't intend to hurt him. You know what they say about Vels. They can fuck you to death. And she's new to living outside a gold field. Hell, if you were suddenly a few hundred times stronger, you'd be dangerous too."

"Except she was very aware of that, detective. We worked together and she was getting used to her strength."

"Don't know nothing about that," Calloway shrugged again. "Just know what I see. A man killed during intercourse with an immensely strong female. I got the only girl with the muscles right there in that cell."

Calen's thoughts raced, looking for a way out. It finally came to him. "Get a DNA sample from her vagina. If she did what you say, there'll have to be some cells that match Alex's. Probably semen too."

Calloway laughed. "Right, and lose my fingers doing it? I'm not getting that close to her; she's still plenty strong despite the gold. We've called for a Protector. She can take her back to Velor for trial."

"And what do you think is going to happen to any genetic evidence by the time she gets here? Or gets Vera back there? Do you know how hot a Vel's body gets diving a wormhole? The heat will vaporize all the evidence."

That got Calloway's attention. Despite the superficial nature of his investigation to date, he was a man dedicated to justice. He looked into Calen's eyes, and shook his head. "Let's wait for the Protector. She can get us a sample before she goes."

"It'll take her three days to get here, maybe more. A Vel's body digests any foreign cells that enter it. Surely you know that." Calen was making that up, but it seemed plausible for an invulnerable being.

"Have to check that out with the doc."

"I'll get you your sample, Calloway. Let the pathologist supervise."

Calloway looked at him strangely. "You two wouldn't by chance have slept together?"

Calen shook his head. "Not exactly. But she is my friend and I know she's innocent. Give me a few minutes before you send the pathologist up with some swabs."

Two minutes later, Calen was standing in Vera's cell, the cell door locked behind him. She was still exuding pheromones at a terrific rate, but the exhaust fan along the wall was venting most of it outside. He tried to stay upwind and not breathe too deeply. "Alex was killed, Vera, crushed to death, apparently during sexual intercourse. Since there aren't any Primes here, you're the only suspect."

Vera laughed. "Now that's rich. I've done every damn kinky thing possible, stuff you couldn't possibly imagine, and I walked away from that bar last night without fucking anyone. Never done that before." Her words were slurred slightly, her eyes unfocused. "And Skietra knows how much I wanted to get laid last night."

"But you didn't?"

"I'm unfuckable, damn it all."

Calen cringed at her coarse words. She was definitely drunk. "Then I need a DNA sample to prove that. From your vagina."

Vera laughed again. "What makes you think you can, college boy? I'm invulnerable, remember. As in, inviolate."

"I don't buy that."

Vera boldly spread her legs and laughed again. "Maybe if you brought one of those rock drills down here..."

Calen blushed bright red at that kinky thought. He turned back to see the pathologist standing outside the cell. "Give me the swabs, doc. I'll do it."

He handed Calen a pair of long cotton-tipped rods, who set them on the bed next to her. "Just relax, Vera. This is for your own good." He started to work on the belt buckle and snaps of her denim jeans, only to have her lean over to try to kiss him, her hair falling silkily over his shoulders, her wrists still bound securely behind her back. He knelt down and tried to tug her jeans downward. They were a very tight fit, no less because she kept moving her legs, her impossibly firm muscles tensing to expand the denim. He lifted her legs to rest her heels on his shoulders and pulled hard on the waistband, and finally succeeded in tugging them down below her hips, then finally off entirely.

"So, maybe now's the time, Calen babe, gold shit and all. Fuck me now. Your friend's would love watching that."

Holding her ankles while trying not to stare between her legs, and failing, Calen ignored her as he gently opened them, marveling at her flexibility as she effortlessly spread her legs as wide as a contortionist. She flopped back on the cot, giggling softly. "Bout time I got laid on this fucking rock."

Calen felt his heart racing. He wasn't an innocent, but he'd never seen a woman's sex that looked beautiful before. Sexy, desirable, enticing, yes, but never pretty. Vera's was. Devoid of even a hint of pubic hair, her labia were as perfectly shaped as her lips. He suddenly felt like a monk kneeling before the most sacred of religious idols, in his case worshipping a woman from a race of goddesses, the ultimate sexual beings in the universe. His hands were shaking slightly as he touched her just above her pubic bone, a thrill racing through his body

as he found that her skin was impossibly smooth and soft, yet with a tightness that betrayed the powerful muscles that lay relaxed just beneath it.

"Just relax..."

"Oh, baby, I am, I am," Vera giggled and spread her legs even further, seemingly amused at the three men staring at her.

Her pheromones were so strong now that it was all Calen could do to lean back and put on rubber gloves, adjusting the nose filters Calloway had given him. The last thing he needed was to contaminate her with his own DNA. He took a deep breath and held it as he leaned down to spread her labia with two fingers. Despite all he'd heard about Velorian invulnerability, he was surprised to find that she didn't feel all that much tighter than the girls he'd known back when he was in college. The weakening gold, he realized. She was wearing kilograms of it.

Vera lifted her head and stared down at him as he slipped his fingers deep, her eyes big as saucers. She was licking her lips, clearly trying to hold herself back. "Holy Skietra... you fucking did it?"

Calen struggled, finding as he went deeper that she really was a lot tighter than a Terran. It took a great deal of strength at first to bury his fingers, but then a ripple of soft, muscular contractions began to circle his fingers, drawing him deeper yet, burying them to their roots. He worked the cotton swabs along side them, penetrating deeply with one while working the other around the inside of her vulva. She started to moan and lift her hips up and down, clearly wanting more. Calen turned and saw the pathologist nodding to him, indicating that he'd gotten enough of a sample.

"There, that should do it." He reached behind him to hand the swabs to the coroner. He started to withdraw, only to have Vera bear down on them, trapping his fingers.

"Don't you leave me now, cowboy. Jus' starting ta be fun."

Calen stared up at her, touched by sudden fear as he struggled against her supernatural tightness. The wave of contractions rippled even more powerfully, her body wanting more.

"Vera, let me go. This isn't helping either of us."

She just laughed at the look on his face, still very intoxicated. "You got anything else hard besides those fingers? Somthin' a lot bigger?"

Calen didn't reply as he struggled even harder to get free of her. It took most of his strength, but fortunately she was very wet now, which was just enough to let him pull his fingers free with a wet pop. He quickly stood up and peeled off the gloves and retrieved her jeans. She waved her long legs around in mid-air, begging him for more, making it impossible for him to get her dressed. Instead, he stood up to rest his hand on Vera's shoulder as she moaned, and set her jeans on the cot. Both of them were breathing hard now.

"You'll be out of here in an hour, Vera, trust me."

Calen nearly ran to the coroner's lab after Calloway let him out of the cell. The doc was studying the screen of his DNA scanner as he arrived. "Son of a bitch, she's clean. Not a trace of ordinary human DNA on the swabs." He spun around in his chair to look worriedly at Calen, then glanced up at Calloway as he entered the room behind him. His voice was barely more than a whisper when he spoke. "Which means, gentlemen, that we've got another Supremis here on Corridor. Someone who doesn't want Vera to stay here. Someone desperate enough to kill an innocent man to achieve that goal. Undoubtedly, a Prime."

"Jesus," Calen breathed as his thoughts raced forward from trying to clear Vera to thinking of the next steps. "We can't let anyone know that Vera's innocent. The Prime will kill us all and make it look like Vera got loose and went on a rampage or something."

Calloway stared back at Calen, fear visible in his eyes. The body in the morgue was a grotesque reminder of the horrors he thought he'd left behind when coming to Corridor. "Then we'll tell everyone that the Protector is delayed but still coming," he added as he played nervously with his moustache. "And in the meantime, we keep her locked up. That means you and me, Calen, we gotta find a way to smoke out our Prime."

Calen looked at him for a long moment. "I've got an even better idea."

"Maybe you do at that. I used to be a top investigator on Reigel Five. I left because – well, that's not relevant just now. But I learned to be a good judge of men. And you're a good man, smart and, more important, *determined*."

Chapter Fifteen

"You want me to break out of here?" Vera asked incredulously as she stared through the bars of her cell. "And you think that will force your Prime to engage me directly."

Calloway nodded as he and Calen stood outside Vera's cell. They'd taken all the gold but her handcuffs off, and she didn't seem as intoxicated as before. She was wearing her jeans again. "We'll spread a rumor that you're hunting her. That will force her to take the initiative. Her cover here can't go too deeply. In fact, I still can't believe a Prime has embedded herself deeply enough in this small colony to escape detection."

"And you've already run profiles on all the women here. You have some suspects?"

"We have thirteen women who profile better than 70% to Aurean genetics based on appearance alone. The one with the highest score, 95% is one of our Guardians. The others range from wives to medical students. Two of the whores down in Corridor Town score very high."

"Don't the medics have DNA scans on everyone?"

Calloway shook his head. "Miners like their privacy."

"So why don't you bring them in and screen them then? Especially the whores if they like to wear gold. That's a classic way to hide among Terrans."

"And just what do you think would happen if we exposed her?" Calloway said angrily. "No weapon we have on Corridor could stop a Prime. She could kill us all."

"That's not exactly true," Calen corrected. "You already scanned all the suspects coming in, Calloway, and none of them are true Primes."

"Not that it matters," Calloway added. "There've been rumors of a new type of Aurean, a Kella'prime, that doesn't show up on the sensors, yet has most of the same abilities. I queried Velor some time back on how to recalibrate the scanners for them, but they wouldn't even acknowledge there even are any such thing. Best I could find was this report from a contact on Kelsor 7. One of their research ships had a run-in with some Kella'primes, or so they say. Just loose crew talk; there was never anything official, and that was over a decade ago. A lot can happen in that time. Anyway, here's what we've got." He handed a sheet of paper to Calen.

Calen scanned the paper. "Gen-1 with ten times normal human strength. That wouldn't be a problem for Vera."

"Keep reading," Calloway said.

"Offspring of Gen-1's are called Gen-2. Five hundred times Terran strength and near invulnerability?" He looked up. "Sure wouldn't want to meet one of them in a dark alley."

"I think that's exactly what your friend Alex ran into."

"They also mention a Gen-3, the offspring of two Gen-2's, but they don't say how powerful they are. Presumably a lot more I guess."

"The question is, can your girlfriend handle her?"

Calen shrugged. "Vera's pretty buff. Maybe."

"Hello!" Vera waved from inside her cell. "Anybody want to ask me that question? Or am I still the criminal here?"

"Sorry," Calen said as he walked closer to the bars. "But you've not exactly been in your right mind for the last few hours."

"So I'm better now. How do I get out of here?"

Calen turned to pose the same question to Calloway.

"I figure we use a laser to burn through the gold, something a partner in crime might do, and then you make it look like a real escape. Nobody gets hurt, though."

"Except for you," Vera said menacingly. "I'm going to kick your ass, Calloway. If it weren't for my friend Calen here, you'd still be convinced I did the crime."

Calloway stepped further away from the cell. "The way I got it planned, is that the two of you are going on the lam. We'll be looking for you, Calen, because you helped your girlfriend escape, and Vera because she's an escaped murderer. Maximum force manhunt. We'll make a good show of trying to catch you guys, but fail. Our real job will be to convince the Prime that she has to handle things herself."

"Police incompetence, huh?" Vera laughed. "That won't be much of a stretch."

Calloway ignored her as he handed Calen a police laser. "Wait until I'm upstairs. And use full power, otherwise it won't melt the outer layer of those cuffs. That's Vendorian steel."

Calen walked over to the cell as he fumbled with the unfamiliar laser. He thumbed the control to Full and aimed it at Vera. She turned to the side and held her cuffed hands out as far from her back as she could. He pushed the firing stud, only to have the beam miss her and catch the metal frame of the reinforced window to send a riot of sparks flying, the frame sagging as it melted.

The laser was incredibly powerful.

Calen's hands were shaking wildly as he aimed and thumbed the release again. This time the beam grazed Vera's back, splashing against bare skin to make it blaze white-hot.

"Ouch... that thing's damn hot," Vera cried out. "I'm still wearing gold, remember?"

"Sorry. I can't aim this thing for shit."

"Then let me get closer." She rose to walk across the cell and stand a meter from the bars. She turned her back to him, gripping the bars with her handcuffed hands. "Try it now."

Calen did, and this time the beam hit the handcuffs to tear a huge hole in the alloy covering. Yellow gold began to drip down her lower back.

"Again. Hurry."

He fired wildly, releasing three bursts, two of which hit the cuffs, one her lower back, making her tattoos glow as if lit from beneath. The cuffs snapped free to fly across the cell.

"O.K, that's coo..." Vera started to say, only to gasp as she clasped her hands over her breasts. A riot of sparks exploded beneath her black top, and she slowly sank to her knees as her hair billowed upward, blue sparks enveloping most of her body. Calen dropped the laser and staggered backward, his hair and eyebrows singed. Vera cried out the same way she had in the maintenance closet, and fell to her side to hold her hands between her legs now, writhing across the floor. Clearly, she was caught in the grip of another orgasm.

Minutes passed during which she writhed on the floor, and then the sparks slowly faded. Her jeans were smoking as she tossed her head back to take a few deep breaths. "Skietra, I didn't expect that!" she gasped.

"We gotta get out of here, Vera. Right now. Make it look good, O.K.?"

She leaped to her feet like a gymnast and walked over to grab the bars. Her shoulders and back flexed impressively, and the two-inch steel bars gave off a groaning squeal as she easily pulled them outward far enough to step through the opening. Leaping past Calen, she disappeared up the stairs in a flash.

He pounded up them behind her, arriving just in time to see Calloway fly across the room to crash into a pile of empty boxes along the far wall. Vera slammed her fist down on his desk to shatter it into halves, and then grabbed Calen before leaping through a large glass window, trailing him behind her.

"Gotta make it look good," she winked back at him as her feet hit the ground.

By the time everyone raced over to look down at the street, they were gone.

Chapter Sixteen

Apartment block next to the commercial sector

"What do you mean, she escaped?" Daglon shouted at the holo image of the low-ranking Guardian who secretly worked for him. "They had her bound in gold. A Protector is coming."

"Seems that her friend, that engineer from Power, he came and stole a laser and burned the gold off her. She damn near killed Detective Calloway during her jail break."

"How long is it going to take to find them? This rock isn't that big."

"We've been searching for two hours. No clues so far. We're guessing they got a suit and went outside. Could be halfway out of the system by now."

"No way," Daglon said with a shake of his head. "She'd need a ship to keep her friend from getting fried by solar radiation. And since she's a murderer, and she knows now that you Guardians are trained to subdue Supremis, she won't be so easily captured this time. She'll probably kill all of you, one at a time."

The Guardian looked afraid. "The brass is issuing heavy weapons, but nobody is sure if they'll stop her. Seems she got stronger after exposure to all that heat and radiation."

Daglon abruptly clicked the holo off, and walked across his small living room to call up the stairs. "Zarla, honey, I need you down here for a moment."

Zarla looked like she'd been crying when she came to the bottom of the stairs.

"We've got a problem, honey. The Velorian escaped."

She looked at her father in total disgust as she sat down on the couch, arms folded. "Let me guess. You want me to hunt the Vel down now?"

"Nobody else can."

"I thought you said I wouldn't have any contact with her?"

He reached out to hold his daughter's hand. "You know she'll be hunting us now, honey. And this rock isn't big enough to hide on forever."

She sighed deeply before looking back at him, her moist eyes large and luminous. "So how do I do it? She's very strong."

"Not as strong as you. You just need a little extra energy."

Chapter Seventeen

Zarla stared at herself in her bedroom mirror as she pulled on the same outfit she'd worn when she met Alex. She carefully buttoned the top up further this time. Leaving to walk down the street, she followed the directions her father's friend had given her, eventually finding herself standing at the end of an alley behind the Guild Hall. There was a large metal box mounted on a pole there.

Deciding this had to be the power junction her father had mentioned, she twisted the heavy padlock until it snapped open and opened the cover to reveal the glowing power conduits, the cables as thick as her wrists. She hesitated for a brief moment, and then took a deep breath and did as her father had told her. She reached in to grab the A and B phases of the power distribution.

Her body stiffened and began to shake violently as a riot of sparks raced up her arms, and the lights in the neighborhood dimmed as the 50,000-volt feed line shorted through her body. She grimaced in pain as the power channeled inward to begin conversion to orgone. Her breasts began to ache and burn horribly, but she pushed past the pain to hold onto the two cables for nearly five full minutes, sucking megawatts of power from the grid. Empowering herself this way, so easy for a true Prime, was pure agony for her. But she wasn't going to face the Velorian without being empowered.

Her hands and arms were white-hot to her elbows by the time the pain overcame her determination and she had to let go. She fell backward, barely catching herself as she sagged to her knees, blue sparks arcing from one breast to the other as her body struggled to re-establish its internal equilibrium. Her breasts felt painfully swollen as she got back up and closed the power junction box, carefully twisting the lock back in place to keep any kids out of it, then buttoned her top back up. Ducking back into the shadows, she was two blocks away when the first of the Guardian's flitters flashed overhead to hover above the junction box.

Running effortlessly down the alleys instead of taking the moving walkways, she was soon back at Strangelove's, the same place where she'd met Alex. The encounter that morning seemed like a bad dream now, but she knew it was just the start of her nightmare. Her first crime committed against humanity. Even worse, the fact that she was back here preparing for battle made her sick. Violence beget violence, isn't that what every religion taught? The downward spiral was inescapable once it started. It was seductive because it always began with good intentions and was paved with brave deeds, but it led to the orgies of mayhem that had always plagued her people.

She walked into the darkened portal, wondering as she did whether she could truly break the spiral of violence and go back to her studies. Her father said to end it by killing the Velorian and her companion. How many Primes had said the same thing to themselves before going into battle? How many Velorians? Did every warrior think this way, believing they were acting to protect their loved ones? That it would end if they were victorious?

Lost in introspection, she almost walked into the steel wall that blocked the darkened tunnel. There was a heavily armored door located at its center. She tried the handle, but found it was locked. She gathered her strength and twisted harder, and felt the satisfying surge of strength that made the thick handle vibrate and scream and finally tear free in her hand. She dropped the useless handle as she found that the door was still locked. If the Velorian was hiding here as her father expected, she'd surely know she was coming now.

She was committed now. Pressing her fingers tightly against the door frame, she scrabbled for a purchase with her fingernails, the thick steel crumpling in her grip. Bracing her leg against the door, she pulled with all her strength, violently tearing the thick door from its hinges, sending it flying over her shoulder to clang up against the rock wall of the tunnel.

She quickly ducked through the opening, only to be dazzled by an incredibly intense violet light. Her face burned and her hair billowed around her, a thousand tiny pinpricks stabbing her skin. She blinked her burning eyes closed to protect them from what she belatedly realized was the Velorian's heat vision, and threw herself to the side, only to have the lethal beams follow her, blazing a glowing path across the tunnel floor. Desperately seeking a weapon, she found a hand-sized stone, then leaped to her feet to throw it as hard as she could toward the apex of those lethal beams. The rock connected with something, sending sparks flying from its supersonic impact. The violet glare disappeared.

Knowing she had only seconds before the Velorian targeted her again, Zarla launched herself at the spot where the Velorian had been standing, assuming that the human would be hiding behind her. The other engineer, Calen, would be her one weakness.

She saw a pair of long legs in jeans go past as she skidded to a stop, finding to her satisfaction that the man she was looking for was huddled against the wall, exactly where her father had expected him to be. The Velorian was still blinking her eyes, her forehead covered in rock dust, as Zarla's hands found Calen's neck. She wrapped her long fingers around his weak flesh as she kneeled against his back, pinning him against the floor. She looked calmly over her shoulder, her eyes meeting Vera's, her voice deceptively calm. "The game ends now, Velorian. Or he dies."

Vera stared down at Calen in horror, seeing the Prime's long fingers surrounding his neck, knowing she could crush his windpipe with only the slightest exertion, even sever his spine with her knee. She didn't understand how the Prime had gotten past her so easily. Given Calloway's information, she'd expected that the Kella'Prime would be stunned by her heat vision. Yet this girl didn't look harmed in the least.

And she was still a girl. Early twenties and pretty in a dark-haired way, phenomenally fit as expected, her eyes Supremis blue and glowing even in the dim light of the cavern. She was dressed like a model, and her expression was strangely calm, almost serene, totally devoid of the malevolent arrogance of a warrior.

"Don't listen to her, just—" Calen gasped before Zarla tightened her grip to choke off his breathing.

"Please, don't hurt him," Vera pleaded as she saw Calen's lips turning blue.

"Will you cooperate?"

"I will... we have no reason to be fighting, you and I."

Zarla laughed as a strange heat began to course through her body. "No reason? Try a thousand years of warfare. Your kind killing mine, my people protecting ourselves by killing you."

"With these poor Terrans doing most of the dying," Vera said simply, playing on the girl's innocence. She saw the Prime's eyes narrow, her body tensing, tendons standing out on wrist and hand as she struggled against her own strength to keep from killing Calen. The hormonal rush that was built into every Supremis when faced with dangers, adrenaline to the tenth power, was coursing through her veins, darkening her skin. Vera knew she'd have to be careful to talk her down, all traces of a freedling girl disappearing from her speech. "You've killed one innocent already today. You don't need any more blood on your hands, now do you?"

Zarla licked her lips, shaking her head as her body grew warmer, a strange anger building inside her. Anger directed at anyone fair-haired. She bit her tongue, trying to speak rationally instead of just lashing out. "You can't stay here, Velorian."

"My name's Vera. And your name is...?"

"Unimportant."

"I thought it was your people's tradition to give your name to one whom you plan to kill. So they can carry word of your conquest to the next life."

Vera growled. "If you leave Corridor now, no one else has to die."

"Perhaps everyone will die," Vera said smoothly. "I managed to repair your reactor. The repairs are temporary. When it fails again, the runaway reaction will destroy make this asteroid unlivable."

Zarla's eyes flicked back and forth nervously as she suddenly worried about her father. She felt as if she was standing on pins and needles. "I don't believe your pale lies," she hissed in reply. "And even if it were true, we can evacuate."

"Is that what you want to? Run away? Find another place to hide among these humans? Start over, pretending to be a Frail?"

"What do you know about starting over?" Zarla snarled. "You Velorians are so in love with your perfect golden planet. You haven't seen what war does to people. You haven't been to Earth. You haven't seen how war kills everything good that's inside us."

"No, I haven't," Vera said softly, convinced now that the girl wasn't a warrior. "All I know is that you need Calen and me to keep this world alive. Isn't that enough?"

Zarla blinked as she listened to words that she herself might have said. The battle lust of her hormones faded ever so slightly, but they still had a grip on her. She shook her head violently, hair flying, trying to push past it. "No. He can do it alone. You cannot stay. My father prohibits it."

"Your father?" Vera laughed. "And here I thought I was talking to a woman, not a child."

Zarla glared at Vera as Calen struggled to speak. "Her name... is Zarla," he choked out. "Zarla Sophra... medical studen..." His words ended as Zarla mercilessly tightened her grip.

"My father has fought you Pales on many worlds," Zarla started to say. "Your words..."

"You're a medical student?" Vera exclaimed. "On my world, physicians save lives, they don't crush the life out of weaker beings."

"There... there are sacrifices that the Empire requires..." Zarla began, only to hesitate as she heard her own words. She was defending the Empire? Impossible. She thought instead of her father. "This is our home. A place away from the killing."

"Then what was that this morning? A moment of passion? A misguided moment? Or was it Aurean mayhem? The murder of an innocent human? Just because your father commanded it?"

The tortured look in Zarla's eyes said Vera was on target with the last.

"I did what I had to do," she said sullenly.

"Cold-blooded killing? Fighting for the glory of Aurea? I don't believe you."

Zarla looked up sharply, a flash of anger crossing her face. Yet she said nothing.

"If you truly believe that, then your killing isn't done, Zarla for I'm not leaving Corridor. But don't hide behind that human. Face me like the warrior you seem to want to be."

"Do as she says," a male voice said from the doorway. "She is not your equal."

Vera jerked her head to the side to see a man standing inside the bulkhead door, and guessed he was Zarla's father. He moved faster than humanly possible, dashing down the

tunnel to stand beside Calen. Before Vera could react, he'd replaced his daughter's hands with his, and lifted Calen cruelly off the ground by his neck, his feet dangling as he struggled to breathe. A Gen-1, Vera thought, remembering what Calloway had said about Kella'Primes, but even then, he'd have ten times Calen's strength.

She looked calmly back at Zarla, knowing it was the girl, not her father, who was going to decide the outcome. "So this is how it's going to be, Zarla. Your father holding an innocent man hostage while we fight, the victor deciding the fate of Corridor? And I thought you Kella'primes were different than your progenitors."

"Don't... don't do it," Calen gasped, momentarily loosening Daglon's grip. "She's Gen-2, a lot stron..." His words ended in a choking gasp.

Zarla walked slowly toward Vera, her fists clenched, her face flushing as the primitive warrior's battle rush threatened to overcome her again. Vera glanced back at the bulkhead door, knowing that an empowered fight would likely be lethal to Calen in the enclosed space of the tunnel; the shockwaves from their blows alone might bring the roof down on them. Her best defense was to exploit the Prime's overconfidence. She relaxed her body, opening her arms wide. "Kill me if you must, Zarla, but I'm not going to fight you."

"Then we claim the right of Darla'al," Daglon said urgently.

"And that is?" Vera asked innocently.

"The culling," Daglon answered in a growl. "A fatal embrace. Submit and your friend will survive."

"You want me to let your daughter hug me to death?" Vera asked incredulously, a sliver of fear lancing through her practiced calm. Calen had told her how Alex's body had been crushed, most of his bones broken. "Only an Aurean could be sick enough to corrupt such a loving, human gesture."

"Do I look sick to you?" Zarla challenged her as she unbuttoned her mother's borrowed top, dropping it behind her to reveal the perfection of her empowered body. Her slender frame was gloriously endowed from her energy absorption.

Vera's smile faded as she saw how well the Prime had prepared herself for battle. She forced a smile back to her face as she met the challenge, her own top landing at Calen's feet. She tensed her upper body, revealing a maze of sharply defined muscles.

Zarla's eyes opening wide as she saw her tattooed body, so tight with muscle.

"As you can see, I'm hardly a Frail like the man you killed this morning. I will not be easy to kill. Your father and my friend may not survive our battle."

Zarla swallowed hard as she began to circle Vera, arms extended, fingers tensed in claw-like grips. They were on their third circuit when Vera leaped forward, bowling Zarla over, trying to twist her arms behind her back to subdue her.

Zarla fought back with tremendous strength, ripping her hands from Vera's grasp, her long legs wrapping around Vera's torso like a python claiming its prey. She hugged Vera to her breast, slamming her against the tunnel wall. Vera fought back with her flight power, propelling the two of them into the far wall of the tunnel, their impact shattering enough rock loose to half bury them.

Desperate to protect Calen from the collapsing tunnel, Vera struggled to take the fight outside, but managed to crash into the ceiling instead, showering them with more rock. She spun around in mid-air, trying to fly, and managed to send the two of them crashing into the steel bulkhead, the clanging impact bending it outward.

Zarla merely smiled at Vera as she slowly tightened her grip on Vera's chest until her volatai began to spasm, ending any hope of her flying them away. All traces of Zarla's girlish confusion was gone now, replaced instead by the feral confidence of a predator with its prey in its teeth.

Vera fought back by grabbing the girl's hair to bend her head back, pressing it into the thick steel bulkhead, then tearing at the steel wall with her other hand to rip a ragged gash in it. She jammed Zarla's head into the gap, folding the jagged steel downward against her exposed throat to mold the inch-thick steel around her neck to immobilize her.

Zarla jerked her head back with horrifying strength, the steel tearing apart with a scream, her eyes blazing directly into Vera's.

Blinded by Zarla's heat vision, Vera tore at Zarla's eyes with her fingers, only to cry out in mortal pain as Zarla's arms continued to tighten horribly. Her chest cavity compressed until her heart began to pound painfully, skipping beats as Zarla's uncanny strength threatened to break her ribs. She used the last of her own vaunted strength to slam her forehead into Zarla's, the blow sending violent shock waves reverberating through the tunnel. She tried to fly them closer to the entrance, and the steel bulkhead bulged and popped as it nearly gave way before he volatai started to spasm a final time.

Vera's eyes felt like they were protruding from her sockets as her collapsing chest sent waves of compressed blood through the rest of her body. She tore desperately at the girl's hands, trying to loosen her arms, her proud muscles flexing more powerfully than they ever had before.

It was no use.

Zarla's body was as hard as sintered steel now, her Primal genetics superior in every way. Horror turned to panic as Vera realized the futility of her struggle.

Zarla tried to finish it quickly by slamming Vera up against the side of the tunnel, the granite cracking like eggshells around them, and placed her lips tightly over Vera's and pinching off her nose to explosively exhale the air she still held in her lungs. The super-compressed air added enough internal pressure to freeze Vera's heart in mid-beat.

Zarla released her grip to allow Vera's limp body to fall to the floor, the feral look quickly fading from her eyes. She knew that while Vera's heart was stopped, she wasn't yet dead.

"You know what to do now?" Daglon asked his daughter.

Zarla nodded, the horror of crushing bones and tearing cartilage from the morning's attack coming back to haunt her. She kneeled down, brushing the blonde hair gently from Vera's blue eyes to see her looking up at her helplessly, her pupils dilated and fixed. She wondered if the Velorian could still see her.

"Kill her. Quickly," Daglon hissed. "Don't think, just do it."

Zarla stared into Vera's wide eyes for a long moment, the horrible sensations of the morning filling her with nausea, and shook her head slowly. She rose and turned to face her father. "I cannot kill again. I will not."

Daglon saw the tortured look in his daughter's eyes. She was not trained for this. But she had to act. "This is the last time, Zarla. I promise you. Never again. Do this now, and we are free. Forever!"

Zarla closed her eyes as she made the most important decision of her life. "You told me that just this morning, and you lied. Lied to *me*. If I give in now, I'll *never* be free from your seductive spiral of violence. It has to stop now."

"She's Velorian," Daglon hissed again, suddenly terrified by his daughter's refusal to finish the job. "She knows who we are. She and her kin will hunt us down. They will not show the same mercy toward us!"

Zarla shook her head again as she walked across the tunnel, retrieving her discarded top and buttoning it back up. Despite defying her father for the first time in her life, she strangely felt confident and sure of herself. A confidence she hadn't felt since her mother died. "I won't kill for you, father. I won't kill for anyone. I will live up to the vows I've taken with my brothers and sisters in Paix."

"Paix? Those fanatics? Then you are dooming us both to the death chambers. Or worse."

"I think not, father. Release the human and arrange for one of the short-range garbage scows. Put enough air and food on board for the man and send the two of them to the nearest other colony. That will give us time to leave here and return to Aurea."

Daglon stared at his daughter as if she was insane. "I can't return without completing my mission. Do you have any idea what they'll do to me? To you?"

"It can't be any worse than this senseless killing."

"You have no idea how much worse it can be," Daglon pleaded.

"At least on Aurea, I can argue my case about becoming a Healer. More importantly, I can add my voice to those who want to stop the killing." Her heart soared as she dreamed of the joys that would come from joining with her brothers and sisters in the Paix movement, all of them trying to bring a message of peace to all of Aurea. To be with them physically, not just some collection of photons dancing in the air.

"You don't understand, Zarla. You've never been on Aurea. The Empire does not suffer fools or traitors. It isn't a democracy."

"Traitors? We are returning to save our world. And you are the fool, father if you don't understand the changes that are coming." She smiled warmly, her blue eyes sparkling with the dreams of youth. "The age of the Kella'prime is coming. Together, my brothers and sisters are going to change the Empire. We will sweep away the old order and bring peace to our world. And to all others."

Chapter Eighteen

Ten thousand miles from Corridor

Calen woke up in silent, freezing darkness. Shivering violently, he rose and began feeling his way along the frost-covered wall in front of him. He tripped over a plastic bag in the darkness, and suddenly knew where he was: inside a garbage scow.

He reached up to massage the aching spot in the middle of his forehead, and suddenly remembered Zarla reaching out to tap his forehead. Her finger must have hit him harder than a boxer's punch, knocking him out cold. Before that, she'd been arguing with her father, something about sending a garbage scow toward another Klaxtonian colony. Clearly that was where she'd dumped him.

He wracked his brain, recalling that Alpha was the closest asteroid right now, a distance of three, maybe five days. He had no idea how much air and energy a garbage scow held, but he did remember that Zarla had seemed strangely unwilling to kill anyone else. Still, it wasn't comforting to realize that he was trusting his life to her desire to not add to her guilt. She was Aurean, and everyone knew they were born killers. She'd proven that when she'd crushed the life from Alex.

He pushed those unsettling thoughts to the back of his head as he continued groping along the wall, finally locating the control panel. He pushed a few buttons and was rewarded when a light came on overhead. He squinted into the light as he started searching through a mound of garbage bags, quickly finding Vera lying crumpled in one corner. Kneeling beside her, he found that her skin was cold, her body stilled, but her eyes were still wide open, staring straight ahead, unseeing. To all appearances, she looked dead. If she'd been merely human, he would have closed her eyes and left her body in peace.

But he knew better than that. He'd read a fascinating article about Velorian stasis as part of his research when he heard a Velorian was coming to Corridor. It had described the way Velorians could be revived even when seemingly dead for a period of time. Their bodies entered some kind of suspended animation where they could live for years if they were chilled to near absolute zero, even for weeks in a tropical climate. He glanced at his watch. It had only been fourteen hours since Vera's potentially fatal encounter with the Prime.

The question now was what to do with her. Should he just sit back and endure the journey? Land on Alpha? Their medics could presumably revive Vera. If the Guardians back on Corridor couldn't deal with Zarla, that Protector being sent to deal with Vera could. Most likely, the Protector would be dispatched to find them. She could cross the gap between Corridor and Alpha in mere hours, and locate the scow along the way.

No, there was too much risk in that plan. Once the Protector found out about what was really going on, she might decide that chasing Zarla and her father was a higher priority – even higher than the fate of Corridor itself. Vera's repairs to the reactor had been hurried and crude. It wasn't going to hold. If he wanted to save his friends, he knew he had to try to awaken Vera and get her to fly them back to the rock. With any luck, Zarla and her father would already be gone before they got there.

The question now, was how to revive her? Supposedly a great deal of electricity was required.

He started searching around the scow, tearing open garbage bags, looking for some wire. He finally found a coil of frayed heavy-duty conduit beneath a bag of frozen kitchen scraps. He was grateful in one way for the cold that was gnawing at his bones. At least it kept the smell down.

Some discarded tools were useful to pry off the cover of the control panel near the door. He peeled away most of the wire insulation, and carefully wrapped one end around a power coupler. Leaving the other lead free, he propped Vera up against the icy wall and wrapped one bared wire around her chest, making sure he had good skin contact with her breasts, twisting the wire around them to make sure. He debated whether to wrap the other wire around her neck or waist, and finally decided on her neck. Her thyroid gland was supposedly the source of the hormones that controlled Velorian energy storage and conversion. Satisfied with his wires, he paused to carefully arrange her hair and tilt her head so she was looking at him, hoping that she was somehow aware of what he was doing. Then he retraced the wires back to the control panel.

He paused there to consider what would happen when he shorted out the container's power supply. There were really only two possibilities: Vera could wake up and fly them both back to Corridor before he either froze or was asphyxiated, or she wouldn't, and his end would come quickly. Without power, the container would drop below -200°C in an hour, and he was only dressed in street clothes. The oxygen generator would fail as well, but he'd be frozen solid by the time that mattered.

Holding his breath as he said a little prayer, he tossed the second loop of wire around the positive power coupling and jumped back.

A blinding flash of sparks erupted from both the control panel and Vera's body at the same time. The sparks continued for nearly thirty seconds, her body jerking around like she was having convulsions. He hoped that was a good sign – at least her muscles still worked. Then, before she showed any sign of consciousness, the container was plunged back into total darkness, its power supply exhausted.

He staggered in Vera's direction, stumbling and falling twice as he tripped over more bags of garbage, his eyes filled with afterimages from the sparks. He gradually became aware of a dull red glow to his left. Heading that way, he kneeling beside her again, and was strangely reassured to find that the glow was coming from her breasts. Was that a sign that her orgone metabolism was starting back up?

He placed his hands close to her glowing breasts, warming himself, only to find that her chest was still unnaturally quiet – she wasn't breathing!

Without thinking, he did what he'd seen on holo shows so many times: he slammed his fist into the center of her chest to try and shock her into taking a breath.

His fist bounced painfully off her steel-hard sternum, her skin still so hot it burned him. Grimacing determinedly, he interlocked his fingers and used both hands to throw all his weight into the next blow.

She coughed!

Encouraged now, he slammed his fists against her chest again and again, only to feel her fingers painfully grab his forearm to stop his blows in mid-swing.

"Vera... Thank God, you're..." His words ended in a choking gasp as her grip tightened horribly. He screamed in mortal pain as the air filled with the crunch of cartilage tearing. Horrible, bone-crushing pain raced up his arm as she twisted his wrist and pushed him back, sending him flying head over heels to land in a pile of reeking garbage, his arm broken badly.

Chapter Nineteen

Vera gasped for air and opened her eyes, only to be greeted by darkness and a man's groaning screams. She recognized the voice.

"Calen—" she started to say, only to have her dry throat swallow her rest. She looked around in the darkness, seeing nothing to help dispel her confusion. Where was she?

"God damn it," Calen groaned again, the pain in his voice galvanizing her to action.

The last thing she remembered was the horrible pain of the Aurean's embrace, collapsing her chest. She took another deep breath, and gasped as her chest ached as if it was bruised deep inside. She knew that the pain hadn't come from the fists that had awoken her, but instead, from Zarla's terrible embrace, that thing her father called Darla'al.

Everything suddenly made sense except one thing. Why was she still alive? And why did the air smell so bad?

"Is that you, Calen?" she asked, her voice barely as loud as a whisper.

"Over here," he groaned, his voice weaker now. "Arm's broken. Bad."

Vera floated in his direction, struggling to see in the tachyon spectrum. Ghostly gray images began to appear at first. She blinked her eyes and concentrated, and suddenly the scene around her snapped into bright, colorful focus. She saw that she was inside a garbage

scow, the walls looking strangely ethereal from their coating of ice. She found she could see through them just as easily as she could image things inside. The view of the starfield around her was brilliant and clear. She turned her head both ways, but couldn't see any sign of the asteroid.

"Where the hell are we?"

"A half day out from Corridor," he grunted. "Heading toward Alpha colony I think. Days away."

Vera could hear his teeth chattering, and suddenly realized how cold it was. She could see her own breath steaming. A quick look at Calen's arm revealed that the bone just above the wrist was shattered in a dozen pieces, his flesh bruised badly. "I did that?"

"Don't... not to worry," he said through gritted teeth. "My fault. Shouldn't have been that close when you woke up."

"Why's the power down?"

"Used what was left of it to wake you."

She just stared at him for a long moment. "How the fuck did you know about that?"

"Did some reading," he said painfully. "When I heard you were coming."

"Typical for an engineer."

"Damn it's cold in here."

"I can fix that." She focused her heat vision on a portion of the far bulkhead, gradually heating the metal to a glowing incandescence. The air temperature began to rise precipitously. She picked Calen up gently and laid him down close to the glow. "This'll at least keep you from freezing while I try and figure out how to slow this thing down and head back to Corridor."

"And face Zarla again?" he groaned.

"I'll be smarter next time."

"She might not even be there. She was saying something to her father about going back to Aurea. She sent us away to buy time."

"Time I don't want to give her."

"She's dangerous, Vera. As much to you as to me."

"We're obviously both dangerous to you," Vera said as she searched for some materials to splint his arm with.

Calen tried not to think about the pins and needles of impending nerve damage that were starting to join the awful pain coming from his arm. He started to shiver despite the growing warmth. "Think I'm going... into shock," he said through chattering teeth.

"Not on my watch you aren't," she said cheerfully as she returned with a couple of metal bars and some more wire. "Hang on. This is going to hurt a bit."

Chapter Twenty

Corridor Spaceport

"Hurry up, father. This is taking way too long." Zarla set her heavy load down in the shuttle and turned back to stand in the opening. She was wearing a white top and skirt now. The color of peace, she told him.

She brushed the tousled hair from her face to see her father gathering up some data disks from the station's Nav Console.

"Are you sure you got everything?" he asked her for the third time.

"The place is clean, father. I checked it again."

"O.K," he said as he slipped past her to settle into the pilot's chair. "A five minute warm-up and a systems check and we'll launch."

Zarla closed the airlock door and wandered forward to sit in the seat opposite her father. Her eyes were soft, unfocused, her thoughts already racing forward to her first glimpse of Aurea. She glanced up as something caught her peripheral vision, a dot moving against the starfield. She watched as a garbage scow headed their way. It was coming in very hot. Her heart sank. She'd seen that scow before. "We don't have those five minutes, father. Look!"

Daglon looked up just in time to see the scow hit the surface of the asteroid hard, skidding and bouncing along the rocky surface, a spray of dirt and shattered rock billowing in its wake. The nose finally dug in to flip the scow upside down, crashing to a stop only meters away. "The Velorian!"

"She can't open the container out there," Zarla said, her mind racing. "Not if Calen is still alive."

They both watched as the scow began to slowly tilt on one end, then lifted off the asteroid to float across the pad as if by magic to align itself to a personnel airlock. Unfortunately, the doorways didn't interface. One was designed for people, the other for garbage and industrial waste. "She's not very bright, is she?" Daglon observed grimly. He looked back down to bypass as much of the checklist as he could. It was only the engines that needed to warm up now. A timer began to count down, starting at two minutes.

Zarla opened her eyes wide to look through the wall of the scow. The Velorian was standing in front of the scow's door. "I think she's going to surprise you," Zarla said urgently. "We have to go now."

"Two minutes. Interlock will keep the engines off-line until then."

"No time for that," Zarla answered, surprised by the calmness of her voice. "Time for plan B."

"There is no plan..." her father said, his words ending as Zarla jerked him out of his seat and began to run.

Chapter Twenty-One

Inside the scow, Vera propped Calen behind a pile of the heaviest garbage. "Exhale all the air out of your lungs, Calen, and hang on. This is going to hurt. A lot."

He scrabbled for a hold, his broken arm in a crude splint, as Vera turned back to face the single layer door.

She flexed her fingers, and then stretched them out and jammed them violently into the crack between the two doors. The spongy sealant gave way to bury her fingers to their roots. She took a deep breath and pulled outward so hard that the metal doors buckled and tore open in a single explosion of decompression and screeching steel.

The air in the scow blasted her through the doorway like a shell from a cannon, slamming her against the far heavier doors of the landing pad. She flailed around for a moment, trying to get her bearings, before starting to work her fingers more gently into the crack of that door. The steel was far heavier and the seals thicker, forcing her to go slower. She had to keep this door intact enough to seal after she got Calen inside. The locking mechanism finally tore apart

somewhere deep inside the wall, and the doors opened smoothly, sending a smaller blast of pressure her way. Luckily the inner door of the airlock was closed.

She moved at tremendous speed now, diving back into the scow. Calen looked terrible, his eyes bulging out of his head, his abdomen swollen grotesquely. She wrapped herself around his body, hugging him tightly, placing one hand across his eyes to try to hold him together. She flew him through the cloud of garbage to crash to a quick stop inside the colony airlock, slamming her elbow against the pressure control as she opened her legs wide to dig her toes into the damaged outer doors. The indentations from her feet distorted the doors slightly as she forced them closed. Miraculously, the damaged seals held and the door locked as air flooded into the lock.

Ten seconds later, Calen was choking on the floor, gasping for air, his skin mottled red from burst blood vessels, his eyes bulging and horribly bloodshot. He was bleeding slightly from his left ear and his eyes and mouth were too dry to work, his tongue swollen. But he was alive. Vera held his bloody nose closed as she breathed into his lungs again, wishing desperately that she had some pheromones on her breath now. The hormonal response would help keep Calen alive.

Calen struggled to twist his head away from her grip, his bloodshot eyes opening wide with terror as he awakened. He thrashed around in her arms.

"It's O.K, Calen, You're back in pressure. You're alive."

His eyes focused crosseyed on hers, her frizzed-up hair sticking nearly straight out from her head, and he knew she was right. He'd thought for sure he was going to die as the excruciating pain of his swelling body had threatened to burst his abdomen open like a rotten melon. He was even more amazed that he could hear, his eardrums intact. "Jesus... that hurt like hell." His voice was barely a raspy whisper.

"You don't hurt half as much as that Aurean bitch will when I find her."

"Check... console... ships leaving..."

Vera quickly rose and walked over to look at the control panel mounted in the hallway. "No shit. There's a shuttle prepping to launch right now. Next bay. No cargo or destination recorded."

Before Calen could wet his lips enough to speak again, she dashed off down the corridor. Another groaning of tortured steel filled the air as she threw herself against the inner door of the next airlock, bits and pieces of the shattered latch tinkling across the corridor floor. She disappeared inside the shuttle, only to return empty-handed a few seconds later. "Shuttle's still here," she shouted as Calen struggled to get to his feet. "Full of their stuff, but they must have gone back inside the station."

Before Calen could speak, she spun around and raced down the hallway the other way, disappearing.

Calen took a few tentative steps, amazed to find that he could even walk on his swollen legs. It had to have been Vera's embrace that had kept him in one piece. He started to pass through an intersection of two tunnels, only to have a smooth, feminine voice startled him.

"So we meet again, Calen. Not exactly an expected pleasure."

Calen froze at the sound of Zarla's voice. He turned to see her standing in a doorway, dressed in white.

"This fighting is futile, Calen, we both know it. We know how this script ends. You die, my father dies, the Velorian dies, maybe even me. I don't understand why."

"You... you killed my friend," Calen spit out. "Alex. You started the killing."

"Then I can end it. Tell your friend to meet me outside, about a kilometer south of this airlock, in a pressure cavern there. We'll finish this where nobody else can get hurt." She started to turn, and then paused. "And know this. If we meet again, I might forget my vow to not kill again."

Before Calen could reply, she spun around and disappeared into the airlock. The light turned red and it cycled her out into the vacuum. Shocked for the second time in minutes that he was still alive, Calen staggered over to peer through the glass. He saw Zarla standing in the hard vacuum, her hair billowing around her.

"Vera," he called as he turned and ran after her. She didn't seem to hear. "Vera. You're going the wrong way," he shouted. He followed her as fast as he could with a broken arm and weakened legs, but it took him twenty minutes to find her as she raced through the workers' apartments, scanning through the walls for the Aureans.

"She's outside. Wants to meet you there," he gasped, his lungs feeling as if they were starting to fill with fluid.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Guardian HQ

"It has to be a trap," Calloway said as he met Vera and Calen in his office. "Inside the rock, she has most of the advantages, being stronger and tougher. Outside, your ability to fly would be decisive Vera. Unless she's trying to commit suicide, she's got to have something else up her sleeve."

"She looked very calm to me," Calen coughed, his lungs aching terribly despite the drugs the medics had just given him. "Determined looking even. And she was dressed in white, talking about some vow not to kill again. I thought Aureans always wore black, especially when going into battle?"

The radio crackled next to Calloway's head. "We got the father," one of the Guardian's said. "Not an easy arrest. Strong bastard, but he's down. We're bringing him in now."

Calloway turned to look at Vera, his left eyebrow lifting. "Now this should be interesting. Be nice."

"Nice? I'm going to rip his fucking head off," she growled, hands clenching to reveal the steely tendons that signaled her phenomenal strength.

"He's bound under law. Not just colony law. *My* law. We don't want any more killing."

Vera rose and stalked from the room without saying another word.

Calen stared at Calloway. "If you get a Velorian within striking range of an Aurean, or vice versa, it's like tigers fighting over their prey."

"More like anti-matter," Calloway nodded. "How 'bout you keep your girlfriend out of here for a bit."

"I told you before, she's not my girlfriend."

Calloway finished his initial questioning a half hour later, lost in thought as he walked back to his office. A medic was there working on Calen. "I can tell you this," Calloway said as he collapsed in his chair, "Daglon's seriously pissed at his daughter for not killing you two when she had the chance."

"No surprise," Vera frowned. "He looks too much like ex-military to me."

"The operative words are, 'when she had the chance.' He claims she could have easily finished you off, Vera."

Vera tossed her head back, trying to get her hair out of her face. It was fuller now and seemed to fall everywhere. "So what's he trying to say? That she's going to come and finish me off?"

"I don't think so," Calloway said with a weary shake of his head. "Her father says his daughter's joined this Aurean peace group, some underground movement called Paix. They're trying to change Aurean society to embrace peace. Even stranger, she apparently wants to become a Healer."

"How, by ripping humans apart to see what's inside?" Vera said sourly.

"He claims she only killed Alex because he gave her no choice. He was trying to set you up. Seems her father is sorry now that he ever put her up to it. Not for Alex, but he's sorry for screwing up his daughter's life."

"The self-centered bastard. But it damn near worked," Vera glared back at him. "If not for Calen, I'd still be locked up in your cell."

"You ever going to let me off the hook for that?" Calloway asked.

"Not on your fucking life."

He sighed. "O.K, I guess I had that coming. I was looking to get away from this kind of thing when I left Reigel Five. I expect you've heard what went down there ten years ago."

Calen nodded. Vera either knew too, or wasn't interested.

"So I wanted I nice quiet, peaceful place to retire to, and look what happens! But that's neither here nor there; the question now is what you're going to do with the Aurean. She just wants to go back to Aurea, at least according to her father. Why don't we let her."

"This guy doesn't even sound like an Aurean anymore," Calen said with a shake of his head. "I think he's bullshitting you, Calloway. He certainly seemed Aurean enough when he was threatening to break my neck."

"No argument from me. I suspect his daughter might even have a GAR," Calloway added. "Maybe it's a trap. A direct hit from one of those and you'd be toast. Those things work damn well in a vacuum."

"After all I've been through," Vera shook her head, "I don't think a little heat can hurt me. I'm getting tougher or something. Radiation maybe."

Calloway sat up straight in his chair. "That's where you're wrong. Dead wrong. They're particle beams, not lasers, and they're designed to disrupt the nonlinear bonds of Supremis flesh. Those things were designed to stop Primes and Velorians."

"But they don't work very well, right?"

"Not against Protectors. But they're specially enhanced. A Prime is a damn tough animal to kill. Especially this new kind."

"Animal, huh?"

"If you saw the remains of Alex's body down in the morgue," Calloway said disgustedly, "you'd say animal too."

"Well, for all that," Vera said as she combed her fingers through her blonde hair, "I don't think you understand all that much about the difference between Velorians. I might not be a Protector, but there's no way this little..."

"No way?" Calloway nearly shouted. "The slightest brush of a GAR beam vaporizes human flesh, even Betans. It'll eat its way through meter-thick steel like a flashlight shining through a smoky room. Sure, an M-class Vel might be able to handle a couple of good bursts

before their flesh catches on fire, but a GAR would probably inflict third-degree burns on you instantly, and a two second burst in the face would leave you with burned out eye sockets and cooked brains oozing out your ears."

"How in the hell do you know all that?" Vera asked, her eyes opening wide in horror as tried to imagine the last.

Calloway waved his hand dismissively. "Back on Reigel Five," he said softly, looking down at the floor, "I was trained by the security chief at the embassy there. A Velorian military officer. She was a P-class, and she used her own body as a target to familiarize us with the weapons."

Vera cursed. "God-damn Protectors can do anything."

He looked up at her. "She wasn't a Protector, Vera, but the next thing to it. We had an Aurean problem there for a bit, and she led the campaign. We kicked some serious butt."

"Just as I'm going to do, Calloway." Vera spun around on her heel and headed for the door. "You just fucking watch."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Vera retreated to the police locker room to don the gold-colored top she'd brought with her from Velor, discarding what was left of her torn and burned outfit. She finished by pulling on a tiny silver thong. She'd bought both of the items years before from a guy in a rival gang who sold stuff on the black market. They were made of Vitamax, the nearly invulnerable fabric that made up a Protector's uniform, and were the most valuable things she possessed. Not to mention the most illegal.

She stepped out the office door and turned to walk down the hallway to the little courtyard behind Calloway's office. A stone wall bordered a small patch of grass and a tiny garden. Calen had said something about Calloway having brought a tiny piece of Reigel Five with him, and she suspected this was it.

She was enjoying the feel of the soft grass between her bare toes when she heard footsteps behind her. "This place is amazing..." she started to say, only to hear the whining scream of a weapon firing. A violent burst of prickling heat struck her in the center of the back, the burn so intense that it felt as if it was boring a hole through her body. She jerked her head, terrified that someone had just shot her with the GAR that Calloway had been describing, only to see Calen holding a police laser in his good hand, a ripple of heat rising from the end of the barrel.

"This may hurt a bit, Vera, but you're going to need more energy. A lot of energy."

She nodded, eyes wide, and gritted her teeth against the pain. "I swear you're more dangerous than that fucking Prime sometimes."

He fired again, and Vera gasped as her back burned horribly. She tensed her body against the pain, and was quickly rewarded with the now familiar surge of arousal. The pain faded, morphing into a delicious tingling that made her nipples itch terribly. She wanted desperately to reach up and hold herself, but instead forced herself to pull her hair out of the way of the laser.

Strangely, her hair was far lighter in color now, closer to the shade of blonde that everyone associated with Protectors.



She held her head tightly, her arm tightening with her fantastic birthright as she gasped for air. Her lungs grew superheated, and her exhalations turned into hisses of live steam. Knowing that she really didn't have to breath, despite the aching desire to do so, she emptied her lungs as Calen kept firing, feeling the heat radiating upward to her neck and face.

"Turn around," Calloway's voice shouted over the maddening scream of the laser's power synthesizer. "You're doing it all wrong."

Vera hesitated for a moment, cringing at the thought of that beam finding more sensitive flesh. And then she realized that was exactly what she had to do. Her breasts had to absorb the energy, not her body. Otherwise her blood would boil to make her dizzy like she'd been inside the reactor, maybe even passing out. She gritted her teeth and turned.

The beam splashed harmlessly against her bare stomach as she glanced up at Calen's worried face, then turned to look at Calloway. He was motioning for her to lift her top. She bit her lip and lifted her top free her breasts.

Calen's aim remained on her stomach for a few more seconds, the look of agony on his face fading into a crooked smile as he realized the obvious as well. He lifted the aiming point of his cruel beam, focusing it for a few seconds on the left, then the right, then back again.

She gasped as a wicked rush of warmth infused her breasts, magnifying the needful tingling to the point where it weakened her legs. Arching her body backward, she daringly pushed her chest outward as she slowly sagged to her knees, her body racing toward nirvana as it hungrily absorbed the power of the laser.

The laser ran out of power two minutes later, but by that time, her upper body was glowing as brightly as an arc welder, forcing both men to look away to avoid burning spots into their retinas. Her own eyes were closed as she leaned forward to hug her knees, enveloping her burning breasts, her forehead touching the floor to send blonde hair spilling across the tiles.

Several minutes passed before the arc welder glow faded to a cherry-red, then to a softer ruby glow. She lifted her head and floated weightlessly to her feet, pulling her top back down at the same time. The twin glows that shone from beneath it faded fast now, and her skin began to take on a normal skin tone. The only difference was that she was fabulously endowed again, her erect nipples tenting the yellow fabric like tiny thumbs.

"That... that was so awesome," Calen breathed reverently, glancing at the depleted laser before turning his gaze back to her, his eyes as big as saucers.

Calloway winked at him, seeing infatuation in the young man's eyes. He punched Calen in the arm to shake him out of his trance, and turned back to meet Vera's glowing eyes. "Now go kick some Aurean butt, little sister."

"Little sister?" she laughed, still trying to adjust her undersized top as she headed for the door. "I don't think there's anything little about me now." She paused at the doorway, her look turning serious again. "Can you track the Prime yet, Calloway?"

He shook his head. "Velorian security wouldn't give me the frequencies. Claims they don't know shit about Kella'primes."

"Probably waiting for some bureaucrat to sign off on a inch-thick pile of legal forms. Typical for Velor." She held her hand out to Calen. "Come on. We'll just take care of her ourselves, won't we Calen?"

He dropped the laser and gripped her hand in return.

"You're both going to get yourselves killed," Calloway said darkly.

"We'll all be dead if we don't stop her," Vera shrugged, ignoring Calloway's warning. "So where's that pressure cave she mentioned,"

"Look," Calloway pleaded with her. "I'll release her father, and then the two of them can go back to that snake pit called Aurea."

Calen paused. "He's right, Vera. She won't stay here now. Not with a Protector coming."

"What, and let her go back and get trained and probably kill one of my people on some other world?"

"She wants to be a Healer."

"So she says. Even then, every Prime she saves will kill more Velorians," Vera said angrily. "What's the fucking difference?"

"The difference is that she won't start killing Velorians here," Calen said softly, truly worried about Vera now.

"And what about Alex? Wasn't he your friend? Don't you want to avenge him?"

Calen shook his head. "We can't bring Alex back. I say, just be done with it."

Vera turned and walked stiffly across the room, then back, arms crossed, eyes flashing. She finally shook her head. "No... I can't just let her leave like this. Not after murdering a human. It goes against everything my people stand for."

"You're not a Protector, Vera."

Her eyes snapped up to meet his, her irises glowing so brightly that they dazzled him. "I'm the closest god-damn thing you got to one right now. Let me do my fucking job." Before either man could reply, she turned and flew out the door, moving fast enough to send papers flying.

Calen looked at Calloway, who shrugged. "At least she can fly half decently now. Maybe that will even the odds."

"Is there a way to get to that cavern from inside?"

Calloway turned to punch up some data on his PersComp. A network of tunnels lit up his screen. "Yup. It's just off Central. Corridor 77H."

"Hey, you're a cop, Calloway. You're supposed to prevent crime. A crime is about to be committed."

"They're Supremis. None of our business."

"You said you'd fought them before, and Vera looks stronger than before. How is this different than your fight against the Aurean on Reigel Five?"

Calloway looked at him for a long moment, and then he turned to open a cabinet to take out an ugly looking weapon and set it on his desk. He handed a second one to Calen. "A couple of GARs might even the odds a bit. Just be damn sure not to hit Vera."

"GARs? Here?"

"I got them from Reigel... just in case. Guess I'm extra cautious. Or just a cynic."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Vera cycled out the same airlock Zarla had left through, and the now familiar bite of hard vacuum sucked the air from her lungs in a cough, her ears squealing and popping as rumbling vibrations circling her body. The venting gasses left behind only the unnaturally deep beating of her heart, the sound traveling by conduction to her inner ears.

She walked carefully on her toes as she followed Zarla's footprints across the dusty surface of the asteroid, the artificial gravity of the populated areas within the asteroid replaced by the fractional gravity of the asteroid itself.

The footprints ended at the lighted door of an airlock. Vera didn't hesitate. She walked into the lock and pressed the green Pressure button. The process of evacuation was repeated, her ears popping even louder as the pressure rose. She took a welcome breath of air; despite not needing air, she didn't like the feeling of empty lungs, and stepped out into a hundred-meter long cavern. Zarla was there, standing in the middle of the empty space with her back to Vera.

"Why do we fight each other?" Zarla asked softly, her voice echoing from the walls. "I want only to bring peace to my world, you just want to live in peace on yours. Yet we fight, we kill. And innocents die, the worst crime." She turned to face Vera. "So how does this act of our little play end, Vera? Do we both die here? Only one of us? Or do we find our own kind of peace? Just two women, neither of us warriors."

Vera's heart was beating fast, her body readying for a fight. It was only the softness and indecision in Zarla's voice that gave her pause. "You killed a human. The Protectors consider that reason enough to take your life."

"So we fight, and likely I will take yours. You know that by now. A very special portion of my DNA came from my donor's grandmother. It skipped my mother to manifest in me."

"So what. I'm stronger than I was earlier."

Zarla shook her head slowly. "Not enough. Only now have I realized the power of my own eyes. I can do this..." Her words trailed off as her eyes flared a pale blue, the nearly invisible beams trapping Vera at their apex.

A wave of weakness coursed through Vera's body, weakening her legs to drop her to her knees. A horrible sensation like a million tiny knives seemed to tear through her.

Zarla's eyes faded back to their normal blue. "Your body has no defense against my eyes, Vera. The x-rays I can project are specifically tuned to defeat your vaunted invulnerability. I don't have to even touch you to kill you."

Vera looked up at her, feeling her strength returning in a rush. She'd never felt so weak and vulnerable as she had when those lethal beams were touching her. Still, she couldn't just give up.

She began to circle Zarla, hoping to get close enough to take her hand to hand. Then she remembered Zarla's terrible strength. She was stronger too. Plus there was no way to get close enough in this open space without those eyes taking her.

Zarla stood with her hands on her hips. "You see now why we have to talk, Vera. You see how I could be a force within Aurea's own underground, within our peace movement. I might be only Kella'prime by birth, but with my donor grandmother's birthright, no Prime can defeat me."

"As long as you see them coming," Vera replied. "They're murderous bastards. And far stronger than you."

"Which is why the secret of my eyes cannot travel to Aurea."

Vera forced herself to laugh. "I'm not exactly applying for a tourist visa."

"It's my father that I worry about. He doesn't know. He can never know."

"Which means you can't kill me that way. He'd know."

Zarla glanced at the walls, her eyes flaring briefly again before returning to Vera's. "This is something we must work out, Supremis to Supremis. This is their world, but humans have no place in our discussion."

"We're alone."

"Not for long. Your friend and that Guardian are almost here."

"What do you want?" Vera asked as she paused in front of the girl. She looked so short, four inches less than her own height, her hair tousled, her expression soft, peaceful.

"To simply leave in peace with my father. You are the only one who could try slow us down, and that would force me to kill you."

"I could stop your father. So could the men."

"I need your word you won't hurt him."

"He's bound by law. I have no jurisdiction over him."

"This is not a matter of Enlightenment law, Vera. This is just you and me. Bring him to the space docks. Then we'll leave and be only a memory."

"With one detail. A murder."

A pained look crossed Zarla's face. "Sometimes mistakes are made."

"Tell that to his family."

"I would if I could."

Vera found that despite her still racing blood, her emotions so high, she believed Zarla. She opened her mouth to so, only to have her ears pop as the inner door into the cavern opened. She turned to see Calen and Calloway enter, both of them armed with GARS. "NO..." she shouted, only to see Calloway aim and fire his GAR.

A sizzling bolt of pure death raced across the space, striking Zarla's body in a blaze of white-hot sparks. Calen raised his weapon and fired too, both beams converging on Zarla. The explosion of the particle beams ate the very air in their path, the blast throwing Vera across the cavern. She caught herself in mid-air, and turned to see Zarla standing in the beams, her body glowing as hot as a sun, her hands still resting on her hips. The men fired for several seconds before their GARs shut down to avoid an overheat.

A new sun had been born inside the cavern, the heat so great that the floor and ceiling began to melt around Zarla, her bare feet sinking into the softened rock. Yet she seemed otherwise unaffected as she walked slowly toward the men, the glow of her skin fading fast.

The men cycled their weapons again and prepared to fire. "No, don't," Vera screamed in time. "She doesn't want to hurt any of us."

Calen lowered his weapon hesitantly while Calloway continued aiming.

"Don't force her to defend herself, Calloway. She could destroy us all with just a flash of her eyes."

"It seems your weapons aren't dangerous to me," Zarla added, her words high pitched as superheated steam hissed from her lungs.

"Not dangerous?" Calloway shouted back. "Do you know what these weapons are?"

"No," Zarla said as she paused in front of the two men, both of them looking down at her glowing chest, her skin nearly white-hot. "And I don't care."

"I don't understand," Calloway said as he backed away. "I've seen Primes targeted by GARs before, and they survived, but none of them had shrugged off the heat like—"

"Like what?" Zarla looked back at him, her eyes glowing like blue diamonds now. "What did you think I was, Detective? A Betan?"

"You didn't show up on our scanners," Calloway he said, his thoughts racing, "yet you were stronger than Vera. You have to be a Kella'prime."

"Very good."

"But they aren't as powerful as a full Primes."

"It seems that Aurea made a mistake in my case. My genetic donor's great-grandmother was Galen. And her grandmother's honorific was Aerie."

Calen looked at her blankly, not understanding.

Calloway started cursing. "Shit, she's Tset'lar. No wonder the GARs couldn't..."

"That word no longer has meaning with my people," Zarla interrupted sharply. "The Tsets are all dead, their genetics diluted. I have but a fraction of my donor grandmother's abilities. Still, nothing you could possibly do could harm me."

"The Tset's were monsters, created to kill anyone Velorian. Even their Viragos!" Calloway said fearfully, finally realizing just how hopeless their battle had been.

Zarla nodded slowly, grateful that her father was still in the jail cell. But now three people knew her secret. "The last few days have revealed many things to me. Secrets that neither my father, nor any other Aurean, can know.

"So you kill us to keep your secrets?" Calen asked fearfully, only to see Vera shake her head.

"I don't intend to kill anyone."

"Anyone else, you mean," Calloway added, unable to get the horrible image of Alex's crushed body from his mind. He started to open his mouth to ask her what she wanted, only to have Calen's comm unit buzz loudly. The emergency alarm!

Calen looked up at Zarla, then at Vera, a tortured look in his eyes. He knew what that signal meant.

"The reactor is failing again, Zarla. Vera is the only who can repair it."

Zarla nodded. "Then I suggest you leave my father and me to our fate. We are leaving, and you have far more important things to attend to."

Calen answered his comm, listening for a long moment before snapping it shut, a look of horror on his face. He shook his head.

"No... there's no time. The welds Vera made in the vessel have failed badly. Far worse than before. Radiation is soaring second by second. We've got a super-criticality!"

Vera looked at Zarla, a tortured look in her eyes. "I barely was able to fix it last time. I can't do it alone this time. I need you."

Zarla closed her eyes and slowly shook her head. "This world is no longer my concern."

"Bullshit," Calen shouted back at her. "You killed an innocent man. My friend. Now is your time to repay the debt by saving thousands."

Zarla turned to brush past him, heading for the inner doorway of the cavern. He reached out to grab her arm, and she stopped. "Your father won't make it either, Zarla. It's too far to his cell and then back to the port. You can't fly."

Vera flipped over his head to land in front of Zarla, blocking her way. "Is it any different to kill by inaction than by action, Zarla?" she asked softly. "In either case, you have a blood debt to repay."

Zarla looked angrily at Vera, the glow from the GARs nearly faded from her skin now. "We are done, Velorian. A truce. But working together... that's impossible."

"It's the only way to save these people," Vera insisted. "And your father." She turned and ran toward the door calling over her shoulder, "I don't have time to argue, and I won't plead. Decide now, or you can carry the death of thousands on your conscience."

Zarla glanced into Calen's eyes, and saw the truth. She sighed resignedly. "There truly is no way without me?"

"We won't know until we get in there. But I think not."

Zarla turned to Calloway. "You'll release my father and escort him to our shuttle while I'm helping her?"

He nodded, knowing she was saying that just to let him retain some of his pride. She could rip the bars from her father's cell apart and free him even easier than he could unlock it. "Of course. Now go."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Power Station

Calen was standing in the control room five minutes later, gasping for breath after his sprint down Central. He was staring at the replay from the hardened camera he'd rigged in the airlock. Zarla and Vera had stepped into the containment dome minutes before, and their clothing had promptly flared and caught fire as the god-awful heat washed over them, the ash vaporizing before it could even reach the floor.

He glanced at the temperature readout: 1,450°C. Horrifyingly, the radiation was at 30,000 rads now and still rising fast, most of it gamma rays. That was more than three times the insane level it had been when Vera had first entered.

Something was definitely starting to go super-critical!

He felt a cold lump in his throat as he walked over to the engineering console and punched up a diagram of the coolant system. If the displays were to be believed, there was still enough coolant in the reserve system to keep the core submerged. So where was the super-criticality?

He glanced back at the display to see that the rad meter click upward to 32,000. Turning back to the airlock camera, he saw a blinding corona of blue light surrounding both women as they advanced on the reactor.

Had the core already melted?

Vera was only half-way across the room when she staggered and fell to her knees. The horrible radiation was tearing at her flesh, the blue glow surrounding her body several times brighter than it had been last time. She didn't need a radiation gauge to know that the rads were far higher. That meant only one thing. A puddle of plutonium must be gathering, tearing the atoms of the steel containment vessel apart as it created a depression in the floor, the flood of neutrons from the pile further exciting it.

She rose to hide partially behind Zarla's body, she didn't seem as affected, and together they moved into direct line with the fissure along one corner of the reactor. The radiation was streaming out even more intensely here, and Zarla's body flared such a bright blue that Vera could barely look through the glare, her eyes burning horribly. What she saw terrified her. A glowing blob of plutonium was gathering in a depression on the reactor floor, just as she'd suspected, the mass already several kilograms, barely below the mass for super-criticality of

molten plutonium. But what was worse, far worse, were the dozen rivulets of glowing metal that were flowing toward it.

The core was melting!

Up in the control room, Calen suspected as much despite his gauges. And if there was melted plutonium flowing toward the floor, the mere gravity that sustained them would be enough to complete the deadly process. He dashed over to the power distribution panel and tripped the main circuit that fed the artificial gravity generators. Nothing happened. He cursed, remembering they had sufficient local capacitive storage to run for a half hour on their own.

They didn't have a half hour.

Zarla assessed the situation as well, her training in the sciences sufficient for her to see that an explosion was imminent. She felt Vera hanging onto her back, and knew she was being overwhelmed by the radiation that was beginning to tear into her flesh. With horrible clarity, she knew exactly what she had to do. She had to shield the neutrons from the pile away from the criticality on the floor, and she had to keep the rivulets of molten plutonium from feeding it further. She also knew there was only one way to do that.

A wave of sudden sadness washed over her. The Paix movement, her friends on Aurea, she would miss them all. And for what? Saving humans? She debated running for her life, grabbing her father and taking a shuttle as they'd first planned. But there was no time now. Her father's life, the lives of two thousand humans and one Velorian, they all depended on her.

There was only one right choice. She had to disperse the melting plutonium that was heating out of control on the floor of the reactor, and her only tool was her body.

Without another thought, she threw herself into the fissure, jamming her hands into the crack. Her back and shoulders exploded into Tset'lar muscle as she ripped the six-inch steel apart wide enough to jam her shoulders into it. She twisted her body to paradoxically widen it further as she wormed her way into the core of the ancient breeder. There she kneeled down over the glowing ball of molten plutonium, brushing the rivulets away with her fingers, digging long grooves in the steel floor with her fingernails to channel it away.

In a last desperate act, she then began scooping up the half-molten blob, shaping it into a ball as she wrapped her body around it, shielding it from the neutrons that were exciting it, and containing its own radiation as she did.

Her body flared a violent blue-white, the glow so brilliant that even Vera had to look away. The last thing she saw was Zarla jamming her back into the fissure, the plug formed from her invulnerable flesh slowing the loss of coolant to a trickle.

Knowing she was going to faint in the next few seconds if she didn't get out of there, Vera turned and staggered toward the airlock, collapsing at the doorway to fall inside.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Vera was propped in a chair next to Calen, hugging her knees as he studied the reactor's vitals. A day had passed since her near=fatal encounter in the reactor, and she was still suffering from dizzy spells. Zarla's body was still wedged in the fissure. They had no idea if she were alive or not.

"We've lost nearly half the core, but what's left is under control," Calen said softly. "She removed at least ten kg's of plutonium from the reaction."

Vera glanced at the readout showing the radiation inside the core: still ten thousand rads. She turned to wrap her arm around Calen's shoulders. "She couldn't have survived inside there. No Supremis could."

"She gave her life for us. But why? To make up for killing Alex? To save two-thousand souls?"

"Maybe she was just thinking of her father," Calloway mused from behind her. "Never heard of an Aurean who'd sacrifice herself for humans."

"What's the temp like now?" Vera asked tight-jawed. She agreed with Calloway. The Aurean wouldn't have given her life so selflessly. She was part Tset after all. That was still scary.

"Down to 600C. Pressure is off the reactor. It should be easy to do a proper job of welding it up now." He punched up another display. "We've got twelve hours before we start to lose life support. You've got to get the reactor back up by then."

"Which means welding her inside it?"

"Her body will reinforce that weakened side of the reactor."

"Assuming she's not just in some kind of coma like I was."

"No lack of energy in there. If so, when this thing melts down near the sun, she might awaken."

"Or burn up in the sun," Vera said dryly.

Calen shrugged. "We can't get philosophical; if we try to disturb her, we'll lose the reactor. And Corridor would go with it."

"No problem. I fix things, remember? Your precious reactor is going to keep pumping."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Calloway stood alone in front of the airlock twelve hours later. Traffic Control had given him a heads-up about an object heading their way without a transponder or flight plan. It didn't take a genius to know who was coming. Professional courtesy if nothing else demanded that he meet her. One cop to another.

The lock cycled and opened to reveal a tall, blonde woman dressed in a slightly torn black and red top and diamond studded bracelets.

Her blue eyes focused on his, glowing so clear and bright that he felt as if they were boring through him. "I am Shak'la. I understand that you have a rogue B-class causing trouble here."

He stared at her, unable to speak for a moment. He'd thought Vera was impressive, but this woman was in another league entirely, every millimeter of her body seemingly optimized for beauty. Where Vera had hard muscles and tight curves, this woman's body flowed like a midnight fantasy, every curve smooth and rounded, yet with skin stretched over steel.

He remembered Cher'ee from his time on Reigel Five, and knew, of course, that she was one of the fabled Protectors of Velor, and that she was an order of magnitude more powerful than Vera in every way.

"The B-class?" she asked again.

"Not... not a problem," he said on the second try. "Turns out we actually had an Aurean problem."

She shook her blonde tresses. "Can't be Corridor is free of the dark-hairs. I read the briefing coming in."



Shak'la's eyes narrowed. "Tset? They're all dead. And what's a Kella'prime supposed to be?"

He couldn't help but smile. He wasn't the only one who couldn't get information from Velor. "It's a long story. But first, we have a funeral to attend. Follow me."

Calen, Vera, Calloway and Daglon, Zarla's father, watched as the same scow that Vera and Calen had been locked into was nudged out the docking bay. The small rocket at its rear fired brightly and it accelerated away from the asteroid. Daglon was repeating a poem under his breath, speaking in Aurean. Despite the occasion, an Aurean funeral, a tear formed in the corner of Vera's eye. If not for the girl's sacrifice, she knew she would have been killed trying to shut down the reactor.

Zarla's body was forever entombed inside the reactor, her invulnerable flesh fused with the metal to seal the fissure for good. Vera had verified that her heart had stopped. She was as dead as an energy-infused Supremis could be. While she might be revivable, her father had agreed that removing her body would threaten the asteroid. There was no stronger way to reinforce the reactor's weak spot than with her flesh.

Vera had collected some of the escaped plutonium from the reactor, three kilograms, and Shak'la had fashioned it into a crude nuclear device. Like the Nordics of long ago, she was the maiden who'd agreed to ride with the fallen warrior to Valhalla, immolated in the same flames. She stood inside the scow, holding a glowing chunk of plutonium in each hand.

The hastily arranged funeral was the closest thing to an Aurean ceremony that they could arrange. Like the Nordics they'd descended from, they sent their warriors on to the next world in a blaze of fire. In this case, they would also immolate the books and papers of her medical training instead of her body. The cherished possessions of her life.

Calen waited until the scow was five miles away, and then glanced from face to face, seeing the quiet nods. He turned back to the screen and pushed a button, signaling Shak'la. She smashed her hands together with all the power of a Protector, and the blinding light of an artificial sun blazed forth, vaporized the scow and the last possessions of the heroine who'd been named, Zarla Sophrant.

The funeral had been simple and brief, for a warrior's remembrance of fallen comrades wasn't appropriate here, nor were the telling of tales for which Aurean funerals were famous. Instead, the five of them turned and went their separate ways. Daglon to his quarters to write more on his memoirs. He owed at least that much to Calloway, who was still trying to learn more from him about the Kella'primes. Calloway headed back toward the airlock to welcome Shak'la back inside after she'd cooled down a bit. Vera and Calen walked off hand in hand.

"I guess everyone is capable of being a hero under the right circumstances," Vera marveled. She was dressed in the same type of outfit she'd arrived wearing. "She could have killed me both times we met, but she didn't. Instead, she saved my life."

"All our lives. She must have had her donor's great-grandmother's heart," Calen added. "But who'd have expected that from an Aurean? The donor's grandmother a Tset no less."

"Had to be the Galen part."

"Yup."

"Whatever," Vera shrugged. "Lets go welcome our hot chick back."

"Not much of a funeral" Shak'la remarked as she stepped out of the decontamination chamber a half hour later. "From everything you told me, she deserved better."

"Except for the nuke. We don't do that every day." He looked up at Shak'la as she got dressed. She was completely unconscious of her nudity. "So how do you guys say goodbye to fallen friends on Velor? Another Protector."

"A series of toasts, with everyone telling their favorite story about the fallen one."

"That's it? No blaze of glory?"

Shak'la smiled. "A different kind of glory. We celebrate the loss of a loved one by making more love. The joining of hearts and bodies of the funeral party for two days, all celebrating the joy of life in the face of death."

Vera smiled as she hugged Calen's arm. "Sounds like fun. You got anything more important to do the next couple of days, my friend?"

"You're kidding? Me? You guys?"

"Calloway too. Daniels," Vera laughed as she hooked her arm through Shak'la's. "And a few of the supervisors we met in that bar. We're pretty hot chicks."

Calen just stared at the two of them. "But what about that girl of steel thing?"

Vera laughed as she pulled some long gold chains from her bag. "Seems as if Daglon was traveling well equipped. These were restraints, I presume, weapons even, although I think we'll find a less hostile use."

"I've asked Calloway to prepare a special dinner for us first," Shak'la smiled. "You're going to need your strength."

"But first, you have to teach me the trick," Vera said to Shak'la as she dragged her down a side hallway. "That self-hypnosis super-duper control thing."

Shak'la smirked. "Teaching a B-class one of a Protector's arts? If they ever found out back on Velor, I'd be busted for sure."

Calloway sat in his office later that afternoon, finishing filing his reports. There'd be hell to pay if his old boss read them, but he'd decided to bury the case against Daglon. The only good news was that nobody gave a damn what happened on Corridor.

The case against Vera would be buried too, back on Velor. Shak'la would see to that.

"I have to admit I'm a bit suspicious of the whole thing," she'd said. "Velorian authorities don't pay much attention to crime among Bs, as long as they keep it to themselves. Chances are the Proctors wouldn't even have known about her gang escapades unless somebody from M-class, like the man she worked for, had found out about her past and fed them the details. Which he may or may not have embellished."

Well, Vera wasn't going back now. Another case closed.

He locked his desk and turned around, only to see Shak'la standing behind him, her eyes bright and blue, blonde hair everywhere. She was wearing a black bustier that was unbuttoned across her abs, a gold chain with a cross, and a gold ring. The chain sparkled as she moved, evidence of the incredible energies that were being channeled inside her body.

"Closing the case that easily, huh?" she said, her eyes still bright enough to look through the top of his desk to study the documents he'd just completed. "You're going to let the Aurean stay on Corridor?"

"He wants to," Calloway said cautiously, not sure of Shak'la's reaction. She was a Velorian official. She could overrule him. "He wants to stay close to his daughter, convinced she's still alive."

"Inside the hell of that trashed out reactor? I don't think even I could survive in there for long?"

"Spoken like a true goddess," he winked at her, hoping to lighten the mood.

She brushed the hair from her face and slid into the chair next to him, her body moving so slinkily. "So, what's on your mind, Detective?"

"Nothing really." He paused. "Well, maybe this whole goddess thing. The way people talk about you Protectors."

"We aren't that different."

Calloway laughed. "And some stars are cool, right?"

That drew a smile from Shak'la. "O.K, I'll grant you that we've been kind of rescaled."

"That's one way to put it. I'm just interested in talking to you, no bullshit, no secrets. There was a visiting Protector when I lived on Reigel Five, Cher'ee, but I never got to know her."

"I know her," Shak'la nodded. "Last I knew, she'd been working with that rogue P1 who surfaced on Kelsor 7 after we normalized relations. Some kind of deep wormhole research. Very hush-hush."

"With Alisa? Shit, I haven't thought about her in years. She's the daughter of the Velorian ambassador to Reigel Five during the troubles. Her mother was devastated when she didn't show up for her Rites."

"Small universe, isn't it?"

"Well, at least we have one thing in common," Calloway hazarded. "We're both in the same business. You know, keeping the peace, standing between the bad guys and the citizens, keeping them safe."

"That's true. Except I pretty much only deal with Primes."

"Which is amazing enough. I've seen what those bastards can do. Slag out a battle cruiser with their fists."

She leaned her head back and brushed her hands through her long hair, her arms displaying more than a hint of hard muscle. "That's why I've got the genes I've got. I'm a chick who's kind of hard to slag."

"Yup, one of Velor's heavy hitters, especially now that the Saray'en have gone the way of the Tsets. Or so they say. We're back to where we were a couple of decades ago."

"Except for your girl down in the reactor. Seems the Aurean gene pool is still surfacing some special talents now and again. That scares the hell out of me."

"Never thought I'd hear that. A Protector scared?"

"Inside, I'm as human as you are. The Aureans are pretty good at killing people like me."

"Yeah, I guess. Pretty good at killing everyone. Hard to see that in your case, though. Especially after reading all that folklore and outrageous fantasy about you guys."

"Outrageous is in the genes, I guess. That's why I'm wearing this necklace. To tone things down a bit."

Calloway didn't want to go there. Not just yet. "She was going to be a Healer. The Aurean girl. Did you know that?"

Shak'la shook her head. "Just as well I didn't meet her. One of us would have died, and she sounded like a decent type. For an Aurean."

"That's the same thing she said to Vera. Something about some peace movement she's part of. It seems the war has been going on for so long that its in the genes. When you guys meet a Prime, everything goes into maximum overdrive."

"Genetics again. But only in combat. Otherwise, we can mellow out."

She smiled, fingering her gold necklace.

His eyes followed her fingers as they brushed across her perfectly tanned, flawless skin. He struggled not to stare, his thoughts still unbalanced by just having her sitting next to him. She was so beautiful and so strong. A killing machine, an assassin, but also a loving woman, passionate and warm, sharing her sexuality freely. The ultimate warrior for sure, but also a kind of cop, fighting for freedom of self-determination, the mantra of all Protectors.

The ridiculous concept of one person being all those things at the same time was mind-boggling. Even stranger was a Protector's skill at combining sex with lethal combat, certainly not loving, but fucking and fighting, a contest that would end with the death of the weaker combatant. Shak'la looked far too pretty to have ever been part of any of that.

"But you've taken out your share of Aureans?"

She nodded.

"How many?"

"Five."

"How, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Three men with what the Aureans call Fal'Allure," she replied flatly. "Two others in hand-to-hand combat. Females."

"No shit! Fal'Allure. That's part of the fantasy about you guys."

"Who says it's fantasy?"

"Fucking another *Supremis* to death?" Calloway laughed. "I'm supposed to believe that?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I could show you," she said darkly.

Calloway swallowed hard, realizing he'd pissed her off. "I'm sorry, it sounded too much like the exploitive porn that floats around."

"Do you want to know the truth?"

Calloway nodded and leaned closer to her.

"I'll show you. After dinner."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Dinner was an elegant affair, with Vera and Shak'la dressed in long gowns that made them look even more like goddesses. Calloway and Shak'la sat together, chatting like best friends. Vera and Calen couldn't keep their hands off each other. Even Daglon showed up; strangely, that didn't ruin the mood. The very air was charged with the invigorating scent that seemed to surround Velorians when they're having a good time.

Dessert ended when a dozen restaurant goers joined them at a replica of an old-fashioned piano which one of the waiters could play. Singing the vaporous love songs of Velor, and some old Terran favorites which gradually turned bawdy, they even indulged Daglon with an Aurean song that no one else appreciated.

Calloway looked around at the revelers and smiled, amazed that this eclectic mix of humans, Aureans and Velorians could enjoy themselves this way. Beneath all the grittiness and hard living of Corridor, there truly was magic here. A lonely rock hurtling through space, bent on its own destruction, but also a place where cultures could come together. He laughed, knowing what Daniels would think of that thought. Their tough GM had only one interest. Digging ore. All the rest was fluff.

Shak'la saw the softness in his eyes, and reached out to take his hand, excusing herself to lead him toward the door. More than one pair of eyes followed them, achingly envious of his bedmate for the night.

Vera had to show off a bit, being that she wasn't wearing gold like Shak'la. She tossed Calen over her shoulder and flew from the room, leaving behind a small tornado of napkins and flower petals.

Daglon smiled at the lovely raven-haired lady standing on the other side of the piano. The women with the beautiful voice and green eyes. She returned his smile.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Behind the locked door of his apartment, Calen smiled and kneeled on the floor between Vera's legs, gently resting his hands on the silken steel of her thighs. She'd worn a long skirt to dinner, the sides slit up to her waist in Velorian fashion, and the brief glimpses of her long legs had tantalized him all evening with their beauty and power. Power that was now his to enjoy.

He kissed her knees, tracing his lips ever so slowly upward between her thighs, his hands tracing the tight contours of her fabulous muscles, following those curves beneath her skirt, his kisses following to elicit a gasp of pleasure from her. Her skin felt so soft, yet stretched so tightly over Velorian steel.

"Don't you... need that gold," he asked as he lifted his eyes from beneath her skirt.

She smiled as she slipped down to sit at the foot of the bed with him, kissing him so gently. "No. Not the first time. I want you to feel me the way I am. Empowered." What she didn't say was that Shak'la's crash course in self-hypnosis had taught her the basics of how Protectors could enjoy relations with ordinary humans... without gold if necessary.

They kissed for a long time at the foot of the bed, her lips so soft, her body so warm and fragrant, her soft, blonde hair falling over him, encouraging him to explore the uniqueness that made her Velorian. She might be a woman of steel in most ways, impossible and inviolate in other men's eyes, but she'd made it clear that she was his lover tonight. More than a lover, she was a goddess of passion, the superhuman steel that defined her power momentarily gentled beneath silky skin.

He slowly undressed her, worshipping every revealed curve of her body with his kisses, savoring her strength, her perfection, tracing his kisses down the wonder of her tattoos, ever lower, following the erotic pathways which inevitably ended at her womanhood. She spread her legs wide as he gently parted her with his tongue, thrilling to her compliance as he discovered that hooded button of pleasure, larger than Terran, yet with its tingling hardness undisguised.

Her breathing grew fast now, her moans soft and long, punctuated by tiny squeaks, her body stiffening until she reached down to lift his head. "No, not me... not yet," she gasped. "I want to love you, too."

He followed her cue, and lifted her in his arms to lay her on his bed, amazed that she felt so light. Despite her immense strength, she felt as soft and willing as any woman he'd known. And so many times more beautiful, every inch of her body perfection itself. He gently straddled her, interlacing his fingers with hers as she opened her legs and welcomed him inward. He glanced at the gold chain on the bed stand, but she shook her head again, her smiling eyes telling him that she wanted him just the way she was.

As a goddess, not merely as a woman.

He felt a brief twinge of anxiety as she wrapped her arms and legs gently around him, her heels pressing against his ass, gently urging him onward, but her kisses told him not be afraid. Thrilled beyond description to find himself enveloped in the fantastic strength of this golden woman of Velor, her every movement paradoxically supple and delicate, he guided himself to her with the enthusiasm of a young man.

She was so wet, so willing, yet so firm, her heat enfolding him as he felt waves of rippling muscle moving smoothly along his shaft, drawing him ever inward, the sensation so different than a human woman. Different, but somehow inestimably more thrilling. His thoughts soared, his dreams of making love to this superwoman finally realized, loving his new friend, her sexual powers the pinnacle of her genetic legacy.

He gasped in indescribable pleasure as he buried himself deeply inside her, her soft cries urging him on as she enveloped him with her terrible yet wonderful strength, her arms and legs wrapped so sensually around him... it was so dangerous but so enticing, so much better than any dream, and so incredibly sexy that he cried out in pleasure in seconds, releasing the passions of the last days, thrilling as he cried out hoarsely at the impossibility of making love this way to a fully empowered Velorian.

She laughed and smiled and kissed him playfully, telling him that she'd fully expected that his first coming would be that fast. She teased him with it, telling him she was a goddess of love, so how could it be any other way? She held him inside her as she waited for him to recover, her kisses growing deeper, a hint of honey and wildflower on her tongue now.

His excitement returned faster than should have been humanly possible, and he marveled at his own steel as he began taking her harder and faster this time. Her cries of pleasure matched his own as his excitement soon knew no bounds as he used all his weight and strength to love her, knowing that he could never hurt her. He poured all the brutal emotions of the last days into her body, athletically burning the horrors from his memories as he lost himself in his hard, sweaty and very masculine loving, finding only gentleness and love on the far side of his passions.

They were cuddling in each other's arms an hour later. Calen was exhausted, yet Vera was beaming, full of energy.

"That was really, really nice," she murmured in his ear. "I loved having you so deep inside me, your heart beating so close to mine. To share your pleasures. To be your super-girl."

"I didn't... I didn't realize that was even possible," he gasped for air, "to you know, to have sex like that without gold. So intense."

"Shak'la's advice helped, but mostly I guess it's all a matter of wanting someone enough. Of us both being comfortable enough with my strength. Of wanting to thank you first for everything you've done for me."

"First?"

She laughed naughtily. "You don't think we're done, do you, officer? I told you, Velorian funerals last for two days."

"So you were holding back more than your strength. Your pheromones too, right?"

She nodded. "Mostly. I wanted to just share my body with you, my friend, without drugs or gold or anything unnatural."

He reached over to lift the gold chain from the bed table. "But now, it's time to subdue those mighty super powers, my dear. Time to level the playing field."

"Level it?" she laughed as she arched her back so he could wrap the gold chain around her waist. "I'm Velorian. I could fuck you to death. Gold or no gold."

"A challenge I accept," he grinned as he snapped the ends closed over her bellybutton. She gasped and arched her back, lifting her body from the bed, his with hers, and then her eyes fluttered and she collapsed limply back to it. He ran his fingers through her silky hair, and his fingers returned fragrant with the scent of honey and wildflower. He placed his finger in her mouth and she drew it in deeply, his other hand circling her breast, his fingers tracing around her nipple as it rose with unnaturally firmness. Two hearts began to beat as one.

She lithely rolled him over on his back, reminding him that she still had several times his strength, her scented hair covering his face as she lowered herself over him and began to make love like a Velorian girl. With enthusiasm unbounded, and endless energy.

Her pheromones, combining with the natural drugs of Velorian sex, invigorated him far beyond human limits. A day passed in loving, two beings linked as one, sharing endless pleasures, their bodies attuned to each sensation they shared. The night period came and passed, and still they made love, each orgasm more enjoyable than the last, a chain of pleasures that marched into the past beyond counting, into the future without knowing.

It was late in the sleep period on the second day when Vera felt his body fading, and knew that no amount of pheromone could keep him going longer. He wasn't that old, and he was strong, but he was still just human.

She rose and got dressed to quietly slip into the darkened corridors and lanes that led to the power station. There she undressed as she cycled through the airlock, her gold chain falling to the floor once she was safely in the airlock, releasing the wild energies which she'd contained for the last two days. Her body flared brightly, bringing with it a final, unrestrained blaze of private pleasure, a final orgasm, almost brutal, but undiluted and so unmistakably Velorian.

When she stepped out into the inner dome, the hard rads and hundreds of degrees of heat washed over her invulnerable body, comforting her with their warmth. Smiling, she sat down at her bench and began to work on rebuilding a sticky sodium valve.

Corridor might be a microcosm, she knew, a tiny world racing toward destruction around its own star, but it was her world for now. She had her man, she had her machines, and most importantly of all, she had meaning in her life. She had two thousand souls who depended on her.

Souls who had helped her to find that one place in all the universe where she truly belonged.

The End

Aug. 15, 2004; revised May 15, 2013