

# Emigrants

By Brantley and Velvet Elkins

## I

Tuva didn't know whether they were being hunted. He had to assume that they were.

Internet communications were out, with the loss of all the servers in the cities. There was only static on the radio, and even if he'd had a personal comm, he dared not use it – *they* might be listening in.

*They* hadn't announced themselves, but there was no doubt as to who they were. The only questions were *why*, and, especially, *why now?*

Netcasts over the several days before the attack had reported protests by the Aurean embassy about supposed violations of Belside's neutrality, allegations that the government secretly planned to invite Velorian Gatekeepers or even Protectors.

President Durgin had, of course, dismissed the complaints as groundless and provocative.

"Belside never has been and never will become involved in any entangling alliances," he declared. "We regret that the Empire has seen fit to resort to such chicanery in pursuit of whatever grievances it has against the Enlightenment. Let the superpowers settle their dispute elsewhere; we want no part of it."

There matters had stood the morning that Tuva Armaan had arrived in the capital for a routine meeting at the Forestries Section of the Interior Ministry. The face-to-face meeting with the Section Chief hadn't actually been necessary; they could have handled everything by virtual meeting. But Karness had wanted to get close with him, ask after his family.

"Can I borrow half your brain?" he'd asked. It turned out that the Chief seemed to think Tuva might be of help in finding him a woman – no easy task, given Karness' total lack of social graces or understanding of the opposite sex. After sharing a business lunch in the Ministry restaurant, he had begged off coming back to the office, pleading a family emergency.

The only emergency was that he wanted to get shut of Karness and get home to his wife and children as soon as possible. He made a good start, and had passed the city limits within half an hour.

The Great Western Highway out of Zurin was a marvel of engineering. Two hours' drive from the capital, he crossed the bridge over Ginangu Gorge, then plunged into a long tunnel through the Nisir Massif beyond.

Tuva was about halfway through when the tunnel lights were eclipsed by a brilliant flash of light from behind him. When the flash faded, the tunnel lights had gone out, and the only illumination was from car and truck lights. Then came a dull rumbling, which grew into a roar of sound. Tuva could feel the pavement shake beneath him. People ahead were braking, and he did the same just in time to avoid hitting a truck ahead of him – only to be rear-ended by another car. His own car spun about.

The ground was still shaking when he got out of his car, and he was still shaking when the tremors ceased.

*Tamra*, he thought. *Amira, Azel...*

His wife and children would be at home, on the other side of the Massif, well beyond the range of the blast. Unless the Aureans were also attacking in the countryside. Oh God!

People around him were shouting. Nothing was moving. There must have been a chain-reaction accident somewhere up ahead. No way to drive home. He worked it out in his head. Five hours' walk at a brisk pace... assuming it was safe past the tunnel.

Somebody was shouting at him. He tried to tune it out, but the man's voice was insistent. He wore the bright plumage affected by well-to-do Belsidea men out to make an impression on women – and each other.

"You work for the government," the man pleaded, in a tone at once desperate and condescending. "Tell me what's going on."

The man must have seen his car tag. But Tuva was too terrified and too angry to soften his response.

"Idiot!" he shouted back at the man, a cry of pain as well as anger. "We've been *nuked*. Everybody in Zurin has been fucking *fried*."

The man recoiled as if Tuva had struck him in the face. But other stranded motorists had heard him, and were turning in his direction, looking at him anxiously, as if they expected him to explain everything, as if they expected him to tell them what to do.

That he managed to do so, that he managed to survive and help others to survive, came as surprise even to himself. It was a revelation.

And, as it turned out, his only solace.

## II

Their homecoming was to be an occasion of triumph, an occasion of joy. Their preparations for the final wormhole transit were routine.

Prima Kelsor, astrogator of the Belsidea research ship *Asman*, dutifully oversaw the automatic countdown. Everything was in order, nobody doubted the computers, but Captain Eriq Asenion nevertheless insisted on following formal ritual.

"Is the timing correct, Dame and Astrogator?" he asked.

"Truly correct, Sir and Captain."

"The beacons in sight?"

"Truly in sight, Sir and Captain."

"Our vector centered?"

"Truly centered, Sir and Captain."

Asenion turned to the ship's chief engineer, Fareh Damirzedah.

"Dame and Engineer, disengage the Quantum Electric Drive on my count: 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0."

"Drive disengaged, Sir and Captain."

That last exchange was also routine, but in a new context, for the entire purpose of their mission had been field trials of the new drive that tapped the energy of space itself. Starships had always coasted through the approach to a wormhole, but only the *Asman* would have invited a fatal overload of energy by leaving its drive on.

Their journey was the culmination of decades of research at the Kelsor Institute of Technology. Prima had been told since childhood that the QED would revolutionize interstellar transportation and make Belside a commercial power to rival any other in the known Galaxy.

"Science plus commerce equals victory." She'd heard that over and over from her grandfather. Dr. Jonas Kelsor sat behind her on the bridge at this epochal moment, taking the pilot's chair while the pilot was off-shift (There was no need for Ari Yelchin at this stage; moreover, wormholes gave him the creeps.).

Jonas had earned his white hair and wrinkled face through decades of hard work perfecting the drive that he had first conceived as a young man, years before even Prima's father had been born. He said nothing to her now. He didn't need to. She was flush with the feeling of victory. Everyone aboard the *Asman* was.

Now the wormhole boiled before them, a huge inchoate mass of purple-edged darkness that filled the 180-degree virtual display.

They were too close by now to see the surrounding stars. But Prima could see the ring of beacons set by the Old Galactics, none knew how many eons ago, held in place none knew how — the beacons that marked safe passage. They were on course, aimed dead center.

*Like threading a needle, Prima thought, while shooting rapids.*

She could see nothing within the circlet of beacons that she could not see without it. As the *Asman* neared insertion, the beacons spread across the virtual display and vanished beyond. Prima glanced at the readout.

"Final countdown, Dame and Astrogator," intoned Asenion.

"Sir and captain, transit entry in 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, mark."

At Prima's mark, the ship left normal space. The display showed only a chaos of shifting colors and virtual patterns.

There came an ominous straining sound as the *Asman* was buffeted by the incredible gravitational sheer and higher order forces within the wormhole's maw. But the ship was built to take it, and Prima and the rest of the crew were trained to endure it, to keep their wits about them. However the passage looked or sounded, it was routine. Countless ships of countless stellar nations had done it from before life had seeded the seas of their own planet.

Even so, when the chaos on the display vanished, to be replaced by the familiar starfield of the Belstar system, Prima felt an immense sense of relief. So did they all.

### III

Tuva sat at his desk in his office, going over tomorrow's work schedule and the list of supplies. At least it was what he called his office in the daytime; at night it became his bedroom. In reality it was a small log cabin with a makeshift desk, chair and bed. But it was more than anyone else had — no one else had the luxury of a room all to themselves.

Tuva was proud of what they had accomplished in the last year. Cabins for sleeping, communal kitchens, organized work details. Everyone kept busy, even the young children had chores to do. Keeping busy kept them from thinking about their losses, about the destruction of their planet. The hard labor of building and maintaining their camp was exhausting. Tuva found the exhaustion a blessing — it let him fall into a

deep slumber every night. Otherwise, he would be tormented by the loss of his wife and children.

He had tried to keep the other survivors inside the tunnel as long as possible, waiting for any fallout to disperse downwind, waiting for the Aureans to forget about them. Some people refused to stay. They said it wasn't safe but he could tell from the panicky looks on their faces that it was claustrophobia that caused them to flee the tunnel.

He never found out what happened to them. But he had held the other people in the tunnel together. They were very lucky, he told them. If they had taken the train out of Zurin, with all its stops in the suburbs, they wouldn't be alive. But they *were* alive, and to stay alive they had to trust their own efforts – and whatever other luck came their way.

Their greatest piece of luck was a large truck making a delivery to a supermarket. There was food and, most importantly, bottles of water. It was enough for a few days of careful rationing. But the problem wasn't only lack of food and water. The air in the tunnel began to go foul from the people and their waste.

Tuva knew then that they must leave the tunnel and its security. He led the group along the road to Greatland Park, the nature preserve where he had worked for the last five years. His former home had been a short drive from the Kelsor Institute, where his wife had been employed as a computer programmer.

At first, it had pained Tuva to cut down the beautiful trees in the park. Even worse, to kill the animals that he had been tasked to protect. But it was the only way for them to survive. There were berries to gather in season, but they could hardly live on

those. And he knew of plants with edible roots. He hated to admit it, but he'd grown fond of the taste of smeerp stew.

They'd been lucky so far. Nobody had sighted any Aurean ships since that terrible day. There hadn't been any reports of landings. But Tuva and his people weren't about to push their luck. They remained hidden under cover of the forest, and had lookouts posted at all times to warn of any alien presence. Not that a warning was likely to do them any good.

## IV

The first thing they noticed was the lack of radio chatter.

The *Asman* was too far from Belside for conversation with the Institute to be possible; Captain Asenion had sent a message burst announcing success of the trials, but they couldn't expect a reply for about 15 hours local time.

Only then did the captain try to pick up news from home. It might be more than seven hours old, but that was still more than two Belsidea years fresher than anything they had.

Only there was dead silence on all commercial channels.

Asenion ordered Prima to take a reading on Belstar.

"Radiation output normal, Sir and Captain," she reported a few moments later. "No sign of storms."

Nobody would expect significant storm activity on a red sun. Nothing like that had ever happened before, during all the centuries that had passed since the Seeders had brought humans to Belside.

“I can’t think of anything else, Dame and Astrogator,” Asenion confessed.

“We should attempt ship-to-ship contact, Sir and Captain,” spoke up Danil Aroyan, ship’s communications officer. Aroyan had had nothing to do most of the trip, as the *Asman* hadn’t wanted to advertise its presence outside the system – let alone the purpose of that presence.

“Belsidea, Theran and Scalantran frequencies, Sir and Commofficer,” Asenion quickly agreed.

It would take them 22 ship days to reach home, even by QED. But compared to 107 days... *Make that about 27 and 132 local days*, Prima thought; Belside’s day was close, as planetary days went, to the ship day derived from the Scalantran calendar – but hardly a match. She should start thinking locally again. It was good to be home, even if there was some communications glitch.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the captain on the intercom calling Yelchin to the bridge: “Presence now required, Sir and Pilot.”

A few moments later, Yelchin entered the bridge, reported in, took his seat, and deployed his console.

“Standing ready, Sir and Captain,” he announced.

Then it was Prima’s turn to perform her function.

“Enter normal course for Belside, Dame and Astrogator,” Asenion said.

“Course entered, Sir and Captain,” Prima answered moments later.

“Engage Quantum Electric Drive, Dame and Engineer,” came the next order.

“Drive engaged, Sir and Captain,” Damirzedah responded.

“Take us home, Sir and Pilot,” the captain now told Yelchin.

“Homeward bound, Sir and Captain.”

At that was it – or so it seemed.

Prima looked back at her grandfather, standing by the entrance to the bridge. Jonas had a grave expression, as if he might know something she and the others didn't, as if there were something he wanted to say. But he kept his silence.

There was no telling how long it would take to get a response to Aroyan's hails. Insystem ships would be pretty close to home; Therans would be going to or from their own wormhole, and Scalantrans could be on any of three routes, coming or going.

First came the surprise: after only a few hours, there was a hail from one of the Scalantran traders.

“*Spirit of Commerce*, outbound, this is Travel Captain Chenanga, responding to Belsidea vessel *Asman*, inbound.”

The Scalantran's voice seemed to rumble, even over the com. Then came the shock.

“We are fleeing the Belstar system,” Chenanga said. “Belside was attacked. We are not sure when, but at least one of your local years ago. There is nothing left of Zurin. Given the lack of radio traffic, we presume other cities and technological infrastructure have likewise been destroyed. We did not pause to investigate, but turned about as soon as the situation became clear. The Aureans may still remain in the system or on the planet. We advise you to proceed no further, and to also turn about. We have received no signals from Theran ships or Belsidea insystemers. All embassies must have been destroyed in the attack on Zurin; likewise our factor general's office. There is nothing you or we can do but carry word. This will be our only transmission.”

Prima was frozen in denial. She looked around her. Asenion was fighting back tears, Aroyan was already shedding them. Yelchin and Damirzedah looked numb. And Jonas...

Her grandfather was shaking, unsteady on his feet, and his face seemed almost whiter than his hair.

Prima couldn't move, but Asenion was quickly at Jonas' side, and caught him before he could fall. At a nod from the captain, Damirzedah gave up his seat – his own duty had been done – and the old physicist sank into it gratefully. As stricken as he was, he could still speak.

"We have to make sure," he said. "Outside the cities, people may have survived. We owe it to them. Perhaps we can help them. And if not, what else can we do? Where else can we go?"

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Prima had her eyes fixed on the center of the virtual display that afforded a 180-degree view, looking numbly at the face of Belside's innermost satellite.

There had been more work for Pilot Yelchin than he or anyone else on board had bargained for. It was he who had steered the *Asman* through the complex maneuvers that had brought them here.

They had been working their way inwards cautiously, one moon at a time, looking for any signs of anyone surviving, even of *anything* surviving. But they had met only one disappointment after another.

Sinu, like airless moons everywhere, was heavily cratered. But there were fresh craters now, where factories and shipyards had once been. It had been much the same with Sarru and Dilibat. But Sinu was the largest as well as the closest to her homeworld.

It was here that Belsidea had outfitted interstellar craft, using Vendorian hulls but installing everything else, from engines and controls to maintenance, communication and recycling systems. Her world's shipwrights were known for their custom work, adapting basic designs to accommodate humans, Scalantrans and other species.

It was on Sinu that the *Asman* itself had been built, and it was here that the first commercial vessels using QED technology were to have been constructed. Parts of Vendorian hulls could be seen littering the eternal ash beyond the crater that had once been the Ishid Eleppi Works.

"No chance of survivors," Dr. Kelsor said wearily. The devastation they had already found on Sarru and Dilibat had taken a heavy toll on him. "Even if any of them had had a chance to suit up and get outside..."

He didn't have to say the rest, Prima knew. Nobody could live in a suit for even a day, let alone a year.

"No sign of Aureans, at least," Captain Asenion said. But there was no sign of relief in his words.

They had been scanning every frequency, determined to detect any Aurean transmissions – and dreading the prospect of actually finding any. If enemy ships still remained in the system, they were probably doomed.

"Should we continue?" Damirzedah asked.

As Chief Engineer, under normal circumstances, he would have been with the engine and maintenance crew, his duties on the bridge done. But the *Asman* was now in orbit around Sinu, drive off.

“We continue,” Asenion said. He dispensed with Sir and Engineer. They had all dispensed with formality.

They could have headed straight for Belside itself at the outset, but they had put that off – there hadn’t been a formal decision or a formal order. It was an almost unspoken agreement.

*It’s as if we’ve all been reading each others’ minds, Prima thought. We’ve been in denial, and we want to remain in denial.*

But whatever awaited them on their homeworld, they would have to face up to it now. From this distance, Belside seemed unchanged. It still showed the green and blue of a living world. Surely life continued there. Surely human life...

There was another unspoken agreement – this only between Prima and her grandfather. Neither had given voice to the names of anyone in their family. It was as if their silence could somehow keep them from dwelling on the worst they might find back at the Institute, at the neighboring village. It was foolish, Prima knew. But very human.

Asenion gave the order to proceed to Belside. Reaction engines only now; Damirzedah would see to that. Prima’s job was to plot a course to take low orbit, with the first pass directly over Zurin.

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It was as if they were floating in air, watching the world below. Virtual display was like that. It was different than in space, where there was no up or down, where it was just like watching the sky.

Novices might have experienced vertigo, and anyone suffering from acrophobia would have been well advised to avoid serving on a ship's bridge at a time like this. But Prima was used to it, as were they all. It wasn't the *how* but the *what* that struck fear into her heart.

The Purat river was still there, and at ground zero -- what had once been the center of Zurin -- it had broadened into a lake. Nothing was left of the inner city but bare ground, eroded by runoff from seasonal rains. On the outskirts, there were remains of buildings, twisted metal and concrete. Fire had evidently consumed the suburbs and parks, and the forest along the eastern reaches of the Nisir Massif; the bridge leading to the Great Western Highway tunnel had collapsed.



Scanning from orbit showed low radiation levels; perhaps the Aureans had used a clean bomb, or perhaps the worst of the contamination had been washed downstream. Their present orbit took them southeast, past the city and towards the sea, and would have returned them here in under an hour and a half. But well before that, they braked for a landing and prepared to switch to atmospheric engines.

Their destination was the Kelsor Institute of Technology, west of the Massif, The campus was nestled in a valley off the highway, along with exurban communities that were the living places of its employees and long distance commuters who had worked in the capital. Further west were other centers of population, but here most of the land had been given over to a vast nature preserve.

Nature was still untouched; there were no signs of forest fires. But as the *Asman* came in for a landing, Prima's heart sank: a swath of destruction had cut through the

Institute, taking out the main research buildings and the housing beyond. Not a nuclear bomb, some sort of vibratory death beam.

There was no sign of life on the ground; any survivors must have fled. But there would have been few of those; even people beyond the direct path of the beam would have been shaken to death – their bones shattered, their blood vessels and vital organs ruptured.

Ekaterin, Geoffroy, Henrik, Samuel, and a dozen others – they must be all gone. There was no denying it now. They would have been at work or at home in the center of the beam's path, which cut through their own neighborhood.

No one spoke, except the captain instructing the pilot and the pilot making his automatic responses. The ship landed in a grassy park beyond the main campus, where the nearest buildings showed cracks but were still standing.

"We're down," said Asenion, as if that needed saying.

## V

Tuva had just come back from a discussion with the food team about stepping up smeerp production, building more cages. Smeerps had the advantages of breeding like crazy, growing like crazy and feeding on a lot of things humans would be crazy to eat.

But they were hard to catch, and that meant they had to be raised in captivity, unlike the other beasts of the forest – on which he had imposed strict hunting limits, lest they be depleted. His people needed renewable sources of protein, and smeerp meat could fill that need, even if it got boring after a while. The food team was also working on that, working on new recipes.

*We'll have to scavenge for more webwire for the smeerp cages,* he thought. That was always risky, scavenging outside the encampment, but it had to be done to keep up a semblance of civilization here...

"Tuva, Tuva." he heard a voice calling. He stepped outside of the cabin and saw Davey running towards him. The 15-year-old had been assigned as the lookout at the southeast corner of the park.

Davey stopped in front of him and took a minute to catch his breath. "What is it?" Tuva asked.

"A ship. I saw a ship coming in to land."

"A ship? Do you mean an airplane?"

"No, no. I'm sure it's a spaceship."

*The Aureans,* Tuva thought. *They're back. But what could they want? There's nothing of value left.*

"At the Institute?" he asked.

"Yes."

"We'd better go take a look," Tuva said. He put his arm around Davey's shoulder, suppressing the thought: *I'll never be able to do this with my own son.*

They'd occasionally had other refugees approach them. That's what the lookouts like Davey were for. But they hadn't taken any in for the last several months. They were stretched too thin already. The latecomers had been invited to keep going – at gunpoint, if words failed to suffice.

There were other encampments further west, Tuva knew. Perhaps the passing refugees could find shelter there. He didn't want to know. If the Aureans were still

hunting them, the less each group knew about any of the others, the better. But no Aureans had been seen since that first day.

The few survivors of the Institute – those lucky enough to have been off campus, beyond the range of the death beam – had joined his own group. No one he knew had been among them. None of them had known Tamra or Azel or Amira. But they had told him not to bother looking for bodies; there would be none to find where his wife had worked and his children had been in day care.

Tuva relived the pain now as he reached for a pair of field glasses somebody had salvaged last year. Davey looked eager to set out; this was his moment, his chance to show his value to the community, perhaps even a chance for adventure.

“We’d better be careful,” he might have told the boy now, but it wasn’t necessary. Davey had had caution drilled in to him. Everyone in the encampment had. They knew how to walk stealthily, to keep under cover.

So they moved carefully beneath the trees, and where the trees gave way to brush and bushes past the lookout point, they dropped to the ground and worked their way forwards on their bellies. The brush ended at a road, and across the road....

Tuva motioned Davey behind a bush, then raised his field glasses. The distant ship leaped into focus. It bore the emblem of the Institute, and looked nothing like a warship – no missile tubes, no beam projectors.

There were a number of people gathered around the ramp, apparently engaged in some sort of earnest discussion. Young people, mostly, dressed like Belsidea. There was one white-haired old man. As Tuva watched, the old man suddenly collapsed, and the others rushed to his aid.

## VI

“We had better...” Jonas began. But then words failed him, and a moment later his body failed him, and he collapsed on the ground.

Prima rushed to his side, only to remember that she had no medical training. She yielded to Engineer Damirzadeh, who doubled as *Asman’s* medic and sent Comm Officer Aroyan back to the ship for her emergency kit as she began attempted resuscitation.

“We have to get him to a hospital,” Pilot Yelchin urged – only to cringe with embarrassment as soon as the foolish words were out of his mouth. Yet no one reproached him. Prima looked on, hoping to see signs of life on her grandfather’s face as Damirzadeh called on all the skill she had with CPR.

When time Aroyan returned, kit in hand, there were still no signs of life, but Fareh did her best with the defibrilator and the drug feed. But after several agonizing minutes she had to give up, had to call it.

Prima had been hit too hard by the loss of the rest of her family, however, to be hit any harder now. She had expected to lose her grandfather, and he had told her more than once that he could die content having fulfilled his dreams.

But there was no contentment here, and his dream was ashes – like Zurin and, she supposed, the other cities.

*I’m the last of the Kelsors*, she had thought as soon it had become clear that the rest of her family was gone, her parents and brothers, aunts and uncles and cousins.

They had all lived and worked in the path of the death beam, a weapon so terrible that it had left nothing to identify, nothing to bury.

*We can bury him, at least*, she thought now. But she didn't want to look at her grandfather's body, so she looked away, toward the damaged buildings on the outskirts of the campus. Beyond them, by the road, there was a burned-out recharging station, with a number of derelict vehicles scattered nearby. Further to her left, across the road was the nature preserve.

It was then that she saw the man approaching. She looked at him, then looked around.

Everyone else was busy with the body, or looking towards the *Asman*, as if they couldn't wait to leave this place, once they had done whatever duty they owed to the dead. As if they had some idea where they could go from here.

*"We had better..."* Better what? They'd never know.

She looked at the man again. He was closer now.

The first thing she noticed about him was his unkempt hair hanging down to his shoulders. And his beard — not close cropped as had been the fashion among some Belsidea men, but bushy and scraggly and dirty looking. Dirty looking ... that was the overall impression she got. He was wearing a short sleeve shirt and dark pants. She couldn't distinguish the color of the shirt, it seemed to be brown, or was that dirt? And the shirt and pants had rips.

He was of medium height and wiry, but powerful looking. She could see the muscles of his arms. He looked straight at her with clear brown eyes.

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Tuva was about to shout at the people by the ship when the woman turned to look at him again.

The first thing he noticed about her was her shiny red hair hanging straight down to her shoulders. He hadn't seen anyone so clean and healthy looking since Destruction Day. She was petite — slender, but not fragile looking. She lifted her head and for a moment she reminded him of.... But no, Tamra's eyes had been blue and hers were green. And there was a sadness in her eyes.

Tuva knew that look; he'd seen it often enough in the eyes of the others at the encampment. He'd seen it in himself on the few occasions he'd looked in the mirror — occasions enough to know how he must look to her.

"I'm... sorry," he said. "Sorry about..."

That was as far as he got. Heads turned behind her.

"A survivor," one of the men said. "We need to question him."

"He just walked out of the preserve," the woman said.

"What's your name?" asked the man, who seemed to be in charge.

"Tuva Armann."

"Eriq Asenion, captain of this ship. Are you alone here?"

"I--"

He hesitated a moment, wondering if he could trust these people — then felt ashamed of himself. These were *his* people; they spoke his language.

"We have an encampment, back there in the preserve. One of us saw your ship land. I came to look. We were afraid it might be..."

"Aureans?"

Tuva only nodded, feeling embarrassed.

“Have you seen any before?”

“No. Have you?”

“We haven’t seen them, or heard any chatter from them. But... what happened here. Why did it happen?”

“I don’t know. I’ve asked myself that a thousand times.”

“Was there any warning at all?”

“None. One moment we were just going about our lives as usual, and the next moment the world ended. They nuked the cities and beamed anything important in the rest... none of it made any *sense*.”

They were all looking at him now, but the red-haired woman was looking at him the most intently, as if she were the only one who saw him as a person rather than as a source of information.

“Why did they want us dead?” he went on. “Why were we so important to them? It must have been top secret. Would you believe they took out their own embassy? Their ambassador had been on the newsnets just a few hours before. They took out the Velorians, the Scalantrans... if they want an interstellar war on their hands, they’ve got it. But what have we got to do with it?”

Tuva felt suddenly weary. It was as if all the burdens he had borne for the past year were weighing on him at once. It was at that moment that the woman spoke up.

“Can’t you see this man needs help?” she addressed the others.

And then to him. “We can talk more later. Between us, maybe we can figure out something. There must be something.”

“Perhaps. But I’d better let our lookout know I’ll be staying a while. He’ll already have figured out that you’re friends rather than foes. He’s smart. I’ll send him back to tell the others.”

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“We need this man,” Prima said.

They had served him some food from the ship’s stores, let him use the fresher aboard. Aroyan had offered him some clothes; they didn’t fit quite right, but they were clean.

Whatever reserve Tuva might have felt towards her people had vanished. Once fed and cleaned up and with his first shave in who knew how long, he had been eager to tell them everything he knew, everything he suspected. He had told them about life at the encampment, and why he and his people had kept their distance from others down the Great Western Highway.

“The Aureans might be watching,” he said. “That was always our greatest fear. We didn’t want to risk others leading them to us... or us to them, for that matter, if the worst happened.”

That was also why his people, and probably the others – he couldn’t be sure – had avoided any use of electric power or light. The main power grid had gone down on Destruction Day, but it would have been possible to use solar panels or wind systems to supply a small community.

“Only that would have broadcast exactly where we were. We didn’t want people using cars, either. That’s why we burned the recharging station. It would have run out of stored power anyway, but maybe not quite soon enough.”

Prima was impressed by the way he thought, the way he worked things out. And he looked a lot better than he had when she'd first spotted him. But she didn't want to think about that right now. He probably had somebody back at the encampment – he hadn't talked much about himself; it was always "we" rather than "I;" but that would be the way of things, love even in the ruins.

Captain Asenion had interrupted at one point to remind the others that they had a burial detail to attend to. Aroyan pointed out that they didn't have shovels aboard ship, whereupon Tuva volunteered to scavenge some from an abandoned store down the road past the Institute.

"Hetzinger's?" Prima asked.

Tuva nodded.

"You people all worked here. Stands to reason you'd know the place. But I owe you for the food and the soap, so I'll fetch the shovels."

With that, he was off, rounding the Institute buildings and out of sight.

"We need this man," Prima said. "We need to take him with us. He's a witness. He's the proof."

"Where would we take him?" Asenion asked.

"Wherever we can go to get help. From the Scalantrans, most likely."

"They'll be pissed at the Empire, for sure," observed Damirzadeh. "Only, why should they help *us*?"

"Because we have something they want. They just don't know it yet."

Tuva Armaan had never been off-planet in his life. He had never even wanted to visit other worlds. He had been content with his life on Belside. He had work he loved and a family he loved.

And then, suddenly, he had nothing.

Now these people from the ship wanted him to go with them. To find help. At least to find answers.

“But we have nothing to offer them,” Tuva had said. “We come empty-handed.”

“Not empty-handed,” Asenion replied.

And he explained about their new drive.

Tuva knew next to nothing about physics. His expertise was in environmental management. But he could understand what faster interstellar travel would mean. It was part of history that the introduction of Vendorian steel centuries ago had revolutionized travel by reducing the mass of ships, the heavy armor they had needed to safely pass through wormholes. Reducing the travel time between worlds and wormholes would be another revolution.

It could happen. He could be a part of it.

They were standing there now, awaiting his decision. They had finished with the burial of their own, having taken turns with the shovels – these people weren’t used to hard physical labor. He could have helped, even done the whole job himself, but he had sensed it wasn’t his place.

“Yes,” he said, because that was the only thing to say. “But I have to go back home, explain what’s happening, make my farewells. Maybe one of you should come along. You’ll need to see what we’ve done, and what we’re up against.”

“I’ll come,” said Prima, as if it were a foreordained decision.

The others seemed surprised, but went along with the idea, even when she said she might have to stay over – there’d be a lot to see, and learn.

“We’ll be ready to leave when you get back,” Captain Asenion said.

Just like that.

\* \* \*

When she saw the way Tuva and Davey looked at each other, Prima took it for granted that they were father and son. Took it so for granted that she never even asked.

The encampment seemed to sprawl haphazardly under the trees, in an area that had been cleared of saplings and brush. But after becoming familiar with the layout, and hearing Tuva talk about it, she realized that it wasn’t as haphazard as it first seemed.

A brook ran down the middle; people took water from upstream and returned it – along with other wastes – downstream. It was a swift brook, nothing accumulated in it. The butchery was also at the downstream end, for more efficient disposal of blood and guts. The communal kitchen was just above the butchery. And above the kitchen were the stores of vegetables grown in a clearing beyond the encampment, along with nuts and berries and roots foraged from the surrounding area.

Tuva’s people had looked at him strangely when he first arrived back, and they had looked at her even more strangely. Her heart went out to them: they had only the rudest of clothes, only the rudest of shelter – whatever they had managed to bring with them, whatever they had managed to salvage in stealthy raids on once-populated communities within walking distance. They had nothing in the way of luxuries and little

in the way of privacy: families were thrown together in communal shacks or barracks – in part to discourage any intimacy that would produce more mouths to feed.

Yet they seemed to have a bitter pride, these people. They had built this community with their own hands, and kept life going against incredible odds. They were survivors.

*Could I have accomplished this much?*

Tuva introduced her around. She couldn't remember all the names. But he made a point of praising the contributions each had made to the community, whether building shelters or mending clothes or gathering and preparing food. There were 357 people in the encampment altogether, and he seemed to know all of them.

Prima lost count of the number of stops for meeting and greeting, for words of encouragement and word of the *Asman* and what that might mean. But eventually they ended up at what Tuva called his office, where his right-hand man had been holding the fort.

The right-hand man was Layosh Koidy, short and balding, not the sort she would have expected to meet out here. But what type could or should she have expected? The few survivors of the Institute were from other projects; she hadn't really known them. The rest had been everything from grocery clerks to carpenters; there were a few computer programmers and even one lawyer.

"Layosh, this is Prima Kelsor," Tuva introduced her. "You know about the Kelsor family, I'm sure. Probably did business with them. Only now I'm the one who has to do some business with them."

Prima almost interrupted him to correct the “them,” but then she realized that he had used it deliberately – to make a better impression. Koidy and the rest wouldn’t give the mission much chance of success if they knew she was the only Kelsor left.

As quickly as possible, Tuva outlined their plans: to reach the Scalantrans and, through the Scalantrans, get some kind of help for the survivors here. Maybe even get the Velorians involved – there wasn’t any point now to maintaining Belside’s neutrality.

“Anyhow, while we’re away, I’m leaving you in charge,” Tuva concluded. “I’ll call a mass meeting tonight, I’m sure you’ll be confirmed. And I know you’ll do a good job.”

“So I’m not an idiot, after all?” Koidy said. Only he said it with a smile.

“You never were. But you’ll always throw it up to me.”

Prima looked at Koidy and Tuva,

“I don’t get it,” she said.

“Private joke. I called him an idiot in the tunnel, when we were trapped there after they nuked Zurin. Heat of the moment. But he turned out to be pretty smart, so I brought him along.”

“What did you do before Destruction Day?” Prima asked him.

“I was a banker. But I decided this community was a pretty good investment – under the circumstances.”

Prima stayed over for the mass meeting, where everybody got to see her at once and Tuva explained why he’d decided to go with “the Kelsors,” as he still put it.

They accepted that. They accepted his nomination of Koidy to take charge in his absence. They believed in this man. She was coming to believe in him too. After a meal of smeerp stew and some small talk about that and other peculiarities of the camp, she

slept in one of the crowded communal dwellings – somehow the people made space for her – and slept soundly. She felt safe.

\* \* \*

After breakfast the next morning, it was time to leave. Prima was looking at Tuva strangely as he made his final farewells.

“It must be hard leaving your son behind,” she said as they left the encampment and set off on the trail back to the ship.

“Son?”

“Davey.”

Couldn't she see the pain in his face? Didn't she have any idea? But then, he hadn't told her. He already knew she had lost her family. It wasn't right that he should inflict his own pain on her. But he had to, now.

“He's not my son. I don't have a son any more. Or a wife. Or a daughter.”

She stared at him, sad-faced, looking very vulnerable. And, somehow, also very desirable. He imagined her naked, and was ashamed of himself a second later.

“We've both lost everything,” she said after a moment. “Now we've got to find something.”

“Things can't go on the way they are,” he said. “I've done the best I can for the people at the encampment, but that won't be enough.”

“What you've done is almost a miracle.”

“Not in the long run. We're going to run out of things to scavenge, things like medical supplies that we can't replace. We'll be at the mercy of the weather; too wet or too dry, it doesn't matter: we'll run short of food. But that's not all we'll run short of.”

“What?”

“Hope. We’ve kept up our morale because we think one day at a time – we think in terms of immediate problems. But when – and it’s *when*, not if -- we run up against problems we can’t solve, we’re finished as a community. People will turn on each other, fighting for food, fighting for women, eventually fighting for the sake of fighting. It’ll be the same at other encampments. The Aureans did their work well. Maybe that’s why they haven’t come back to finish the job. We’ll finish it for them.”

“Tuva, you mustn’t—“

“Mustn’t what? Think of the future? It’s the only thing I *can* think of. What people here have to face. What’s going to happen to Davey, and the other younger people? They deserve better than that. They deserve a chance to become better than that. And they’ll never have that chance unless we get it for them.”

There was nothing more he could do here, he knew. Destruction had come out of the heavens, and now they must look to the heavens for succor. The Scalantrans, or the Enlightenment. They had a common enemy now, the captain had argued, and that would surely count for something.

Prima looked at him pleadingly.

“I can’t take this any more,” she said.

“I can’t either.”

He took her in his arms to comfort her – and felt a rush of desire, almost painful in its intensity. He could tell that she felt that desire. Worse than that, it was obvious that she welcomed it as she arched against him and moaned softly when his erection pressed against her.

*This is wrong*, he tried to tell himself. But his body told him otherwise. Her body was telling him otherwise. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a clear space near the trail, carpeted with pine needles.

He released her for the moment.

“There,” he croaked.

She saw, and followed him to their impromptu bower. They were both shedding their clothes along the way.

When he saw her breasts for the first time, he was overcome by their beauty – their perfect roundness, the nipples stiff with arousal. He lifted her off into the air for a moment to suck and nibble them; then they both sank to the ground, and fell on each other, He was being rough with her breasts, he knew, but she didn't seem to mind – she had pulled down his pants as was being just as rough with his manhood, and he didn't care.

He heard her crying and moaning incoherently and realized that he was doing the same.

Prima guided his right hand between her legs. He felt her wetness. Then she put her hand on his erection again,

“Inside!” she cried.

“But—“

“Implant!”

Which meant it was safe. He buried himself in her, as if she were the only safe haven in the world, and began thrusting with abandon. Then she rolled him over and took control, rocking back and forth wildly, her head thrown back in abandon. He toyed

with her breasts, and with her ass, as she drove herself to a climax – she shuddered and he came inside her and they fell into each other’s arms as they basked in the afterglow.

Tuva dared not call it love; it was as much an act of denial as of affirmation – a denial of pain and death. As he came back to himself, he began to weep – weep for all they had lost and might yet lose. Prima too began to weep.

He cried till there were no tears left and then he held Prima in his arms until she quieted. He was glad that she was finding release for her pain and would not have to hold it in as he had. When she lay still, he kissed her gently and then began brushing off the pine needles. He rose and quickly dressed.

“We’ve got to be getting back. Before they miss us,” she ventured, as she put her clothes on.

“I wouldn’t allow this... back at the camp. It’s not fair, but...”

“We can’t tell them about this at the ship. The crew has... customs.”

Tuva took her hand and led her back towards the ship, he could tell that she had become disoriented. Just before the woods ended, he dropped her hand and stepped away from her.

\* \* \*

The ship was ready when they returned. They found a place for Tuva to strap in back in crew quarters. There was a viewscreen there. He could watch the ground drop away as the atmospheric engines lifted them into the stratosphere, where the reaction engines took over.

The horizon became an arc. The world below was greenish-bluish, with fleecy clouds. It still looked like a perfect world, a world where nothing could go wrong.

## VIII

Prima lay on her bed, trying to ignore the snoring of her roommate, Chief Engineer Damirzadeh. They were taking a rest break in orbit before embarking on their journey. Supposed to be, anyway.

It had been a trying time and a tiring time for everyone, herself included, and she wished she could rest as easily as Fareh seemed to. But the events of the day kept going through her mind and she doubted if sleep would ever come.

It was still hard for her to comprehend that all the cities were gone along with most of the people on the planet. She knew that she was now an orphan: no parents, no siblings and her beloved grandfather gone. And somehow, that was the hardest of all, to have seen Grandpa die before her eyes and not to have been able to do anything to save him. And then to simply bury him, without even a coffin, without even a marker.

Yes, he was old and had lived a full and highly productive life. But he could have had several more years, years in which to further perfect the drive, years in which to garner the awards he so richly deserved. And when he died he would have had a memorial service and it would have been attended by family and friends and colleagues and the most important people on Belside.

She thought about his lack of a memorial and vowed that somewhere, someday, she would find a way of memorializing him so that his name would live on.

But the part of the day that she could not get her head around was the business with Tuva. She'd had plenty of lovers over the years, though not more than any normal unattached woman her age — maybe even less due to her time spent on shipboard. Most of them had been casual, but there had been a few that she thought she loved — at least for a while. But never, never had she thrown herself at a man she had just met.

Why had she done it? Had she just wanted sexual release, to obliterate her sorrow through sex? Or had she wanted those things with *him*?

She remembered the visit to his camp, how everyone looked up to him. But mostly, she remembered watching him as he walked through the camp, interacting with people. She remembered how strong and masculine he looked and yet how deeply he seemed to care about his people.

And when he put his arms around her in what she knew was a gesture of comfort and she felt the strength of his arms and the strength of his desire for her, all she knew was that she wanted him — wanted him then and there. The sex itself had been swift and powerful and over too quickly. But for those few moments nothing existed for her but the feel of his body and the wild sensations it induced in her.

And when it was over she had felt an emotional release and finally peace and had been surprised to find that Tuva's reactions were the same as hers.

But what now? Prima had never liked having to share a cabin. She liked her spacious bedroom at the family home with the wide bed she could share with a lover — the bedroom in the home that no longer existed. She remembered the room she had shared in college with its two narrow beds. Somehow, that hadn't adversely affected her love life — but she had been so young then.

She didn't much like the custom of shipboard celibacy even though she knew it was meant to prevent jealousy. But now she was glad of it, and glad of the roommate who wouldn't help her circumvent the custom. It would give her time to figure out what to do about Tuva. Give her time to get to know him and figure out what she wanted from him. Because it was starting to hit her that she might want more from him than sexual release, that with her family gone, it might be time to settle down and form her own family.

\* \* \*

Things began to go wrong not long after they went back on duty and prepared to break orbit, running through the long list of checks they couldn't afford to overlook.

First came a hail on the Scalantran channel.

"*Capitalist Roder*, entering system for rendezvous with *Spirit of Commerce*," the ship broadcast. It was a routine notification for Belsidea authorities, a routine call at one of the hubs where the Scalantrans traded with each other as well as the locals.

Word obviously hadn't reached the *Capitalist Roder* about the destruction here. But that wasn't surprising; it took years for news to spread up and down the space lanes. Captain Asenion decided that the trading ship should hear the bad news, and ordered Aroyan to make the call, which he did.

It would take hours to reach the Scalantrans, and it would be up to them what to do about it.

Some three hours later came a similar hail from the Vendorians.

"Matter of commerce. Matter of delivery. Scheduled consignment of hulls, Sinu-3 Factory," came the bland announcement. The Vendorians were a colorful race, sort of

like upright lizards with bright scales of red and green (male) or blue and yellow (female). But their manner of speech was anything but.

Asenion had Aroyan apprised them, too, of the situation.

And then it happened, an hour after: what they had long dreaded, but ceased to expect.

The *Asman's* radio scanner picked up a sudden burst of chatter on a frequency that had to be Aurean – Engineer Damirzadeh recognized some of the words, although she couldn't make out the entire conversation.

Moments later came an emergency call on the Vendorian channel.

“Convoy under attack. Convoy under attack.”

Prima was terrified. Had the Aureans followed the Scalantrans and the Vendorians through Wormhole 3007B, or had they been here all along, waiting in ambush?

*Our signals. They'll know we're here, if they don't already,* she realized.

“We've given ourselves away,” Aroyan said almost immediately, not reading her mind, only reading reality.

“I take full responsibility, Sir and Commofficer,” replied the captain, reverting to formality for the first time since their fateful arrival in the home system.

“Sir and Pilot, prepare to break orbit,” he ordered. “Dame and Engineer, engage QED. Dame and Astrogator, set course for Wormhole 3007A.”

Right where they'd come in. Right where they'd leave. Unless the Aureans caught up with them.

They were defenseless. The *Asman* carried no weapons. But they had an edge the Empire didn't know about, and Asenion meant to use that edge to the fullest.

\* \* \*

They were *in* space, but there *was* no space.

Tuva reproached himself for his anxiety, bordering on claustrophobia.

People had been traveling space for millennia. The *Asman*, as a research vessel, might be small and cramped compared to the Scalantran trade ships he had seen on the newsnets, but even those would have made him uncomfortable. Chances were that their living quarters would be hardly better than the compartment he was assigned to.

He shared that compartment with Doyle Chosser, assistant engineer, who was responsible for supervision and maintenance of the engines and was thus a member of the Down Crew as opposed to the Up Crew that manned the bridge. The Down Crew also included other systems maintenance people and the foodservice engineer – who would surely, anywhere else, be called simply a cook.

Whatever he was called, Karol Paltons provided good food. It was just heated up from frozen, of course, but Paltons insisted he had chosen the fare himself before the ship set off on its mission.

Only, they were running low on stores now, having planned only for the research mission, the man told him after bringing him his first onboard meal. They'd have to stock up at the next stop, the cook explained, and that could be a problem because... what were they going to use for credit? Word of the destruction of Belside would surely have reached the next stop by now.

Nothing he could do about that. Nothing he could do here, either. He was the most useless person on the ship. No Crew. But he could still be of use when they got where they were going. Prima thought so, and she had convinced the others. He held on to that thought as he drifted off to a fitful sleep. It had been a hard day.

An alarm sounded, jolting Tuva awake, and he soon learned that credit was the least of their problems.

\* \* \*

The Up Crew spared the Down Crew what they saw from the bridge, although it was inevitable that everyone would learn about it.

Not just a radio message, but a video message, hours old. A face appeared on the screen: an Aurean commander, dressed all in black, his uniform matching his hair and beard, a look of hatred and contempt on his face.

“You have constituted yourselves enemies of the Empire,” he began – without any preliminaries, without even introducing himself. “You have gravely offended his Imperial Majesty. Here is how we deal with those who so offend us.”

The video suddenly switched to a panoramic shot of the Vendorian convoy, the tow ship and the hulls. How the Vendorians managed to tow their consignments through a wormhole, nobody on Belside had ever known. But they could do it, and they’d never missed a delivery, or lost a single hull.

The hull for the *Asman* had been a special order, a special delivery. Dr. Kelsor hadn’t been sure the Vendorians could handle that, but they had.

On the screen, an energy beam shot out and destroyed the tow ship. The hulls, freed of the tow lines or tractor beams or whatever had kept them aligned, began to tumble wildly. Then the commander came on again.

“Evasion is futile. Resistance is futile,” the man in black announced. “Prepare to meet your miserable fate.”

The screen went blank, replaced a moment later by the virtual display.

“Do they imagine that we have weapons, Sir and Captain?” Pilot Yelchin asked.

“It doesn’t matter what they imagine, Sir and Pilot. What matters is that they will know what we *do* have by the very fact of our escape. We must reach safe haven – a system where the Aureans won’t dare attack even if they track us down.”

“Enlightenment space, Sir and Captain,” Prima said.

It wasn’t a question, only a statement.

On their research mission, they had avoided populated systems – Enlightenment or even neutral. No one had tracked their trial runs. No one knew the speed they were capable of, let alone how they had achieved it.

That would all have to change now.

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There were wormholes and wormholes, Tuva learned. During the long climb to 3007A, there wouldn’t be much for him to do but catch up on the physics – and politics - - of interstellar travel and commerce.

Systems like Belside’s, with more than one wormhole in their far reaches, could serve as transportation hubs. He’d already known that. Worlds with only one saw far less traffic. He’d vaguely known that, too.

But there was a lot about the network of wormholes that didn't make any sense. Maybe it had made sense to the Old Galactics, but they were long gone. There were systems without any habitable planets but several wormholes. There were short jump and long jump wormholes – one might land you a dozen Old Terran light years away, another in the same system might take you hundreds or even thousands. There were the one-way wormholes; a few explorers had managed to work their way back through alternate routes to tell the tale. The others.... Who knew?

Prima, without any regular duties during the climb, talked with him a lot, trying to make him feel at home.

"None of us can feel at home now," he pointed out.

"But we can get our home back," she persisted. "You can help with that. You know how to talk to people, how to get them to do things."

"We won't be talking with Belisidea. I don't know who I'll be talking with."

"Friends. Potential friends, at least. The Aureans have gone too far. They've made too many enemies. The Scalantrans must already want to take them down. Likewise the Velorians, and their allies in the Enlightenment. And now the Vendorians."

"The Vendorians don't even know."

"They *will* know. We'll see to it."

She took him to the bridge, let him watch the great black yonder through the virtual display, the stars like dust – far more of them that had ever appeared in the night sky on Belside. Most were points of diamond, but under magnification they might reveal themselves as blue or yellow or orange or red – the last were red giants; red dwarfs like Belstar were too faint to be seen at great distances without artificial aids.

Tuva had never thought of his sun as small and obscure. It was just the sun. It must have had some sort of designation in the annals of the Seeders, or the Galen who were said to be behind the Seeders. Maybe the Old Galactics had had their own name for it.

Prima had the captain rotate the display, so that he could see the star they were leaving. It was still there, a blood-red droplet against the blackness. The rest of the Up Crew reacted with a subdued sadness, he thought.

“Most of their families lived in the cities,” she told him later, when they were apart from the others. “They knew what they had lost before I did. Yet they didn’t speak much of it. They knew better than to burden each other. Better than me, perhaps. Better than you.”

“I’ve never spoken of it before. But our anniversary was coming up, Tamra’s and mine. We planned on going out to dinner, and having Amira and Azel stay with some neighbors, while we made love far into the night, and again in the morning. And after – all I could think of was her body. That I’d never see it again, never touch it again... And now, I feel as if...”

“What?”

“As if I’ve let her down.”

“That’s silly. Life has to go on. We can’t mourn forever.”

“And *our* lives?”

“What happened, happened. It was good. But we can’t let it happen again here. Not on the ship. It would affect the others. They have enough to deal with as it is – their own losses, their fears for the future.”

“When I thought of her... gone... should I have grieved for the children first?”

“They were *her* children, they were a part of your love for her. The fruit of that love.”

“But I felt I’d let them down somehow. Let down their memory.”

“Davey,” she said.

“He’s a good kid. Nothing like Azel, but a good kid. A quick study, too. He could be a leader of men one day. I wish he *were* mine. But his father was an attorney who died in Zurin. And his mother Jeniva’s a good woman – but nothing like... I could never...”

“All I ever wanted was to be part of the Kelsor family,” Prima said. “To make my parents proud. To make my grandfather proud. I’d begun to do that. They thought I was too young, they thought they’d be accused of favoritism if they let me have the astrogator’s seat, but I outperformed the other candidates and they couldn’t deny me.”

“Are you truly the last?” he ventured. “Everyone has relatives. I’m sure I still have some distant ones back there. People I’ve never met, but blood kin just the same.”

Prima shook her head.

“Not here. Maybe on Igoybe.”

“*Igoybe*? They’re allied with the Empire, aren’t they?”

“Soon to become part of it, no doubt. We could see that coming. That’s why our Kelsors left, two hundred years ago. Even then, we didn’t like the way they were using science – especially in genetic engineering. Nasty stuff. Grandfather never talked about that much. But he loved Belside, and wanted to make its science the envy of the galaxy. That’s what he dinned into me every chance he got. And we could still fulfill his dream.

Our world may be gone, but we're not. He's saved all our lives. You can see it on the screen."

Which they could. The Aurean destroyer was falling further and further behind. They had never been within range of its weapons, and could lose themselves entirely when they made the transit through Wormhole 3007A – avoiding Thera, as they had on their research cruise; making a quick passage through the next system, picking another destination in Enlightenment space .

\* \* \*

Back in quarters a few ship days later, Tuva was wrestling in his mind about his role in this expedition – about where they were going and what he and Prima could do when they got there.

*It has to be a world where we can find help, he thought now. A world important enough for the Scalantrans to have a factor general. Prima and the others would know best.*

*Or would they? They knew their science, they knew how to harness the energy of space itself. But did they know people, and how to harness the energies within them? In the last analysis, even if they could get help from the Scalantrans, the salvation of their planet could come only from its own people...*

His thoughts were interrupted by... not a sound, but the absence of a sound: a faint hum that had pervaded the ship ever since they broke orbit – but had now been replaced by an eerie silence.

Then that silence was broken by Captain Asenion's voice over the intercom.

"We have a problem," it said. "We've lost the entangler."

## IX

The entangler. It had something to do with turning virtual energy into real energy that could be used by the drive. That was all Tuva knew. But it was enough. Without the drive, they were in trouble. Bad trouble.

“The good news is that we haven’t lost momentum,” Asenion told the Down Crew in the crowded refectory half an hour after he had announced the emergency. “The bad news is that we have to change course. We can’t repair the entangler here; we have to proceed to Thera and hope to find a shipyard willing to accommodate us.”

Tuva suspected the explanation was for his benefit; surely the crewmen were all too familiar with the situation and what they faced. Even he could figure out the bottom line: They’d lose precious momentum changing course to Wormhole 3007C – and with the *Asman* running on only plasma reaction drive, the Aureans could gain on them. But the captain was already addressing that.

“I think we can make it,” Asenion said. “Ari has already entered the new course, based on Prima’s calculations, and Fareh is optimistic about our chances – we’ve got a good power to mass ratio, possibly better than theirs. But they’ll be going all out, once they suspect we’re in trouble, and we’ll have to go all out too. And even if we can make it through the wormhole without coming into firing range, we don’t know what awaits us on the other side. We may be endangering the Therans. Or maybe Thera’s gone, too. We just don’t know.”

The faces around him looked grim. These men and women had thought only an hour ago that they’d at least gained a reprieve – that they had faced the worst, lost all

they could lose, and come through it. Now they knew that hadn't come through it, might not come through it at all.

\* \* \*

Prima's nerves were on edge, as she and the rest of the Up Crew waited to see what the reaction of the Aurean ship would be. Again and again, she ran over the figures in her head: the best figures she could come up with.

The enemy had the advantage in terms of sheer power, no doubt about it. Their plasma engines could outperform the *Asman's* several times over. Moreover, the Aureans were used to high gravity – they could easily boost at several Gs. *But*, and that was the most important thing, their ship was built from conventional alloy steel – easily making it five times as massive as it would have been if the Empire had had access to Vendorian steel. It was the power to mass ratio that would count in the end.

The *Asman's* scanners hadn't shown any change in the enemy ship's course – but the scans, naturally, were running hours behind real time. As the tension mounted, Prima, knowing she had done all she could do in minimizing the loss of momentum in their own course correction, tried to think of other things. Like Tuva.

*If only...*

Her thoughts were rudely interrupted by the sudden reappearance of the Aurean commander on the view screen.

“Having trouble?” he thundered. “We have you in our sights. Soon we shall have you under our guns and—“

Commo officer Aroyan, anticipating Captain Asenion's order, cut it off.

“Now it begins,” Asenion said. “We’ve done the best we can. We have to trust our plasma drive, and Prima’s calculations. May they see us through.”

*I’ve given him the best numbers I could, she thought. But will they be good enough?*

\* \* \*

Tuva had been studying up on the Scalantrans from the ship’s Archive for five ship days. “We’ll have to deal with them when we get to Thera,” Prima had told him. “Maybe your experience at the encampment will help, but you’ve got to know who you’re going to be dealing with.”

He wasn’t sure a crash course would help that much, But it couldn’t hurt.

“Besides,” she’d advised him, “It will keep your mind off what’s going on out there.”

As if!

What was going on out there was that the Aurean ship was indeed gaining on the *Asman*. They must be pushing six t-gees, he’d heard. It still didn’t look as if they were going to catch up – not unless they pushed it even harder...

*Don’t think about that, Tuva told himself. Think about the Scalantrans.*

A lot of it was speculation. People knew all about the Scalantrans, and yet they didn’t really know very much. They were big and red. They had loud, booming voices. They had two sexes; there were some accounts that the females carried their young in pouches.

Maybe none of that mattered. What did was that they were traders. Very sharp traders. They went everywhere in search of profit – even to Velor and Aurea. For as

long as anyone knew, they had shown up at human-settled worlds as soon as the Seeders were done with them. That happened at Belside 2,000 years ago – Scalantran years, that is.

Because nearly all interstellar commerce went through the Scalantrons, humans had adopted – and adapted – their peculiar calendar for use in space. It made sense: local years and days on one planet bore no relation to those on any other, and would cause endless confusion for travelers.

It didn't matter except to keep the ship's log straight, which wasn't his job. His job was to come up with a strategy for approaching the Scalantrons. The Quantum Electric Drive would be a godsend to them, no doubt about it. But would they want to acquire the technology outright, or settle for dealing with Belside as sole supplier?

Keeping the rights in Belsidea hands would be better for his people in the long run – in the long run, a steady source of income was always better than a windfall. Yet it might take a windfall to restore Belside, to rebuild the cities, rebuild the economy. Tuva didn't even want to think about the cost of decontamination for the areas downwind of the nuclear bombs that had struck Zurin and the other cities.

It wasn't going to be an easy matter cutting a deal with the Big Red Ones – not when he couldn't be sure just what sort of a deal he should be after.

\* \* \*

They'd taken to calling it the Creep: the slow advance of the Aurean warship that was closing the gap with the *Asman*.

The *Asman* had had a terrific head start, and the Aureans hadn't made it very far into the Belstar system from Wormhole 3007B when they discovered their quarry. It

would have been no contest, but for the damage to its entangler. Even then, the *Asman* would have easily outpaced its nemesis but for the latter's acceleration boost.

There had been near panic over that at first, and there was still a good deal of anxiety. Still, Prima's numbers seemed to be holding. The Aureans hadn't increased their acceleration any further. Perhaps there were limits to its engines. Or perhaps....

Prima didn't want to think about that "perhaps," didn't want to think about whether the enemy might be playing cat-and-mouse with them, most especially didn't want to think about the possibility that they were headed into a trap – that the Empire had taken the Theran system and would have an ambush waiting beyond the wormhole.

After 57 days, they were nearing Wormhole 3007C, the Aureans still in hot pursuit. She watched the virtual display: they were into the cometary halo now, not much further to go. The warship was still six hours behind, well out of range. She could see it on the split screen; she should feel relieved. But she didn't. Neither did Captain Asenion, or anyone else in the Up Crew.

*We've become too accustomed to disaster, she thought. We've come to expect it.*

It wasn't the first time she'd faced death. During the trial mission, there'd been all sorts of things that could have gone wrong. *Could* have. And if any of them had, they'd have been lost and none would have ever known their fate. They had steered clear of populated worlds, crossed populated systems as stealthily as possible.

She'd known the risks. She hadn't been afraid to die. And she hadn't; nothing that could have gone wrong had gone wrong.

Only now something had. And she was afraid. Not so much afraid of death as afraid of failure. She had a sense of mission. She wanted to be part of it, part of saving her people. She wanted her life to *count* for something.

“Wormhole in sight,” Asenion said, interrupting her thoughts. In point of fact, it had been in sight all along, given enough magnification. But now it could be seen with the naked eye on the virtual display, a small patch of fuzziness against the backdrop of space – in sharp contrast to the diamond pinpoints of the stars.

The Therans on the other side weren’t human. Assuming they were still there. The Aureans were said to despise aliens, even those as humanoid as the Belsidea’s closest neighbors. Even some of the Belsidea had made fun of them, calling them Long Noses and worse. Prima had given the offenders a piece of her mind on the occasions she’d overheard them – which wasn’t often. People at the Institute knew better – had known better, she corrected herself.

The Therans had had an expatriate community in and around Zurin; none were known to have survived. There’d been a Belsidea expatriate community on Thera, too. If they had survived, they might be of help. Or not, given the proclivities of some of them.

*Tuva*, the thought suddenly popped into her mind. *He should be here.*

He should be part of it, too, here on the bridge. Whatever they faced on the other side of the wormhole, they should face it together.

\* \* \*

Allowing him on the bridge at such a crucial time as a wormhole transit was a special dispensation, the captain had told him, and he was expected to be on his best behavior.

“Stand to the rear,” Asenion warned. “Keep quiet. And don’t get sick.”

So Tuva was standing, and keeping quiet and, so far, not getting sick. Should he be worried about that? Prima had told him about Yelchin. If even a pilot...

The wormhole passage loomed before them, a surreal vision of – Tuva couldn’t say what. There was nothing he could compare it to. But it was hypnotic somehow, it drew him in. Or perhaps it was a combination of sight and sound, the formalities of the checklist, the monotonous final countdown...



On Prima's mark, they were in it – surrounded by chaos, and by the sheering forces of the passage, the ominous sounds Prima had warned him about. Tuva began to sweat heavily, but he kept his mouth shut, kept to his feet. He would not, would *not* embarrass her on this occasion.

Had they been there for seconds or minutes? While he was trying to get his head around that, they were suddenly *out*, and—

“God!” he said, breaking his silence.

The space beyond was filled with ships.

## X

A face appeared on the screen. It was a Theran face. And the spacecraft, Prima saw, were Theran commercial cruise ships. Before she could wonder what that meant, the *Asman* was challenged.

“Incoming ship, identify yourself,” the Theran said brusquely. “Failure to do so will subject you to immediate attack.”

He had an especially long *balweck*. Some Belsidea would have considered that laughable. But this was no laughing matter.

“Belsidea private ship *Asman*, Eriq Asenion commanding,” the captain responded quickly. “We claim recognition as refugees. Be advised that an Aurean warship has been in pursuit, and may follow us here.”

The Theran hesitated a moment, apparently consulting a database, then cut off screen for another few moments.

“There is no record of your ship in the Commercial Registry,” he said when he returned. “Prepare to be boarded in order for us to confirm your identity. We have put the Interdiction Force on alert, weapons at the ready. Do not force us to use them.”

“Acknowledged,” Asenion said.

*Weapons? On cruise ships?*

Looking closer, Prima could spot the telltale blisters. But Thera had never fielded anything more threatening than a police force. Like Belside, it had been a neutral world.

*Had been.*

“Shuttle being dispatched,” the Theran on the screen advised. “Standard airlock interface.”

“Understood,” Asenion said. “We shall cooperate fully.”

If the *Asman* hadn't had its own standard interface, Prima thought, the Therans would have been royally pissed. As it was, when they arrived, they didn't seem exactly friendly.

“Captain Eriq Asenion,” he greeted them when they came aboard. “Our log and our registry are ready for your inspection.”

“Whoever you are, you're trouble,” the lead Theran officer complained. He wore a standard police inspector's uniform with a fresh Interdiction Force shoulder patch. “The Aureans have left us alone so far. Chances are they still would, if you hadn't provoked them.”

“We did nothing to provoke them,” Asenion protested. “We returned to Belside only recently from a research mission to find... we don't know what set them off in the first place. All we know is that most of our people are dead. We're only trying to—“

“You could have gone somewhere else,” the Theran cut him off.

“We didn’t have much choice...”

“And now you’re leaving us with *none*. The Velorians are sending a Gatekeeper detachment, but until they arrive, we’re *it*. Do you have any *idea* where that puts us?

*So they’ve joined the Enlightenment*, Prima thought. Hardly surprising, under the circumstances.

“Yes,” Asenion said sadly. “I have an idea. I’m sorry.”

And he led the pair of Theran officers to examine the ship’s records.

\* \* \*

A Theran police boat was escorting the *Asman* to a parking zone half a light hour into the cometary halo from the wormhole. The police said it would take some time to hear back from Belside’s government-in-exile about how to handle the Belsidea.

Government-in-exile? It was news to Tuva, and everyone else on board. When Captain Asenion pursued the matter, he was informed that it consisted of the embassy staff, plus any competent people they could find among the expatriates – no easy task, since a lot of those were women of a certain age with causeless incomes who’d come for sex cruises, then been left stranded without any incomes, causeless or otherwise.

The Enlightenment was picking up the tab, since the self-declared government-in-exile had declared for the Velorians. Not that it mattered; the exile Belsidea couldn’t contribute to the war effort: they had no ships, no weapons, and hardly anybody with military training. The Therans probably treated them as officiously as they were treating the *Asman*’s people.

“If it’s any comfort, they gave the same treatment to a couple of Scalantran ships that made it out after they put up this picket line,” Asenion said.

“No comfort that I can see,” Tuva said. “But we’re here for the Scalantrans, maybe it’ll make them sympathetic.”

“It’s a good thing the Therans don’t know anything about physics,” Prima said. “They can’t have gotten anything out of the logs that would tell them what we’ve been up to.”

“They probably don’t even *care*,” Engineer Damirzadeh said. “They just want to give us a hard time.”

“They should be worrying about whether they can give the Aureans a hard time,” Asenion said. “Converted cruise ships against an imperial destroyer?”

“We’re still in danger, aren’t we?” Tuva hated to say it, but it had to be said.

“If they come, if they get past the Therans.”

\* \* \*

The Aureans came, and they almost got past. *Almost*.

The battle was already over by the time they could see it begin on the screen. That was how brief it was.

The Aurean destroyer burst out of the wormhole with energy weapons already hot, attacking Thera’s pathetic fleet without warning – and without mercy. Two Interdiction Force ships were cut to pieces in less than a minute as three others returned fire – with weapons that seemed totally inadequate – and the rest fled in apparent panic.

Prima could see fragments of the destroyed ships flying apart, but had to imagine the rest. What the rest had been made her sick, any crewmen who died instantly would have been the lucky ones; any who'd suited up would face a lingering death if they were cast into the void alive.

It was madness. The ships that had fled were dispersing in different directions, apparently to increase their chances of survival as the Aureans took care of the three that had mounted the counterattack. All Prima could think of was the senseless slaughter. Then, after more agonizing moments, the remaining Theran ships *reversed course*, assailing the destroyer from all directions.

*How can they expect to survive?* she wondered. And then it dawned on her: they *didn't* expect to.

The stern of the destroyer was its weakest spot – and with the least armament. Arrogant as they were, the Aureans saw themselves as always the pursuers and never the pursued. One of the returning Theran ships survived just long enough to crash itself against the enemy warship at full attack speed.

There was a blinding flash as the Theran ship exploded, but it had accomplished its mission: the destroyer spun out of control, its stern ruptured, its engines destroyed, its air voided, its screens down. The remaining Theran ships now returned to finish the job – as mercilessly as, but more methodically than their defeated foes.

Prima choked on her words. “Method... method to their madness. They bought our lives with their own.”

She turned to Tuva, and he took her in his arms. Then the others followed, each reaching out to comfort another, never mind rank, never mind relationship. They still

didn't know what the future would bring, but they knew one thing: they would never think of the Therans the same way again.

"What you said on the bridge, about the Therans – it wasn't true," Tuva said afterwards, when they had a moment alone together.

"It was the truth we needed," she said. "They were fighting for their own world, for their own people. And we brought it on them. They'll hate us for that. But they saved us just the same. We owe them. We'll always owe them. We have to live with that. Maybe someday we can make it up to them."

"Then we've really got our work cut out for us now."

## XI

"I presume you're aware that your people are in bad odor here," Imre Kozut said.

"Quite aware, Sir and Ambassador."

"Sir and *Eminence*, Tuva Armaan. You forget yourself. You and your people."

"You seem to forget that *my* people are *your* people."

"As such, your people are subject to the legitimate government of Belside."

"Might I ask when that legitimate government plans to return there?"

"The Velorians will see to that. And I will see to it that you never hold office on Belside again. Do I make myself clear? I think that our business, or lack of business, is concluded."

Self-proclaimed President Kozut called to one of his flunkies.

"See this man out," he directed.

The flunky stopped just short of taking Tuva by the arm and hustling him out of the so-called presidential office, once the ambassador's office. But he who had once been regional forest manager under a legitimate government decided to make his exit as dignified as possible.

But a receptionist, who looked to be one of those women of a certain age who had taken her pleasure on cruise ships, had apparently overheard his conversation with Kozut and wouldn't let the matter rest.

"You've managed to piss off the dickfaces *and* our leader," she taunted him.

Tuva felt a wave of rage, so intense that he nearly shook. This... creature had doubtless had her way with Theran gigolos, then sniggered at them behind their backs, as she was sniggering at the whole race now. He imagined punching her out, hitting her so hard she'd fly right out of her chair.

It took all of his will power, but he controlled himself. To give into his feelings would only make things worse. Without a further word, he headed out of the so-called government center and emerged into the bright yellow sunshine.

He met the others back at the *Asman*, which was parked at a remote corner of the spaceport. There was room at the inns, but they didn't have any money or credit.

"How did it go?" Captain Asenion asked.

"About as I expected. It's the Scalantrans we need to be dealing with. I've told you so before."

"Indeed you have. But how do we get their attention?"

\* \* \*

It had been a slow journey to Thera. They hadn't had any choice about that. Even if the entangler hadn't been disabled, they couldn't have come in on the Quantum Electric Drive without giving themselves away.

"The Aureans can't give us away now," Captain Asenion had pointed out. "Should we even tell this supposed government-in-exile?"

"I don't think we can trust them," Prima had said. "But I think we should leave it in Tuva's hands. He has a feel for people."

So they had left it in Tuva's hands, and now he had come up empty.

"I could have been more diplomatic," he admitted to her in private. "But what was the point? The man was stupid and arrogant, standing on ceremony because he had nothing else to stand on."

"After waiting so long..."

Kozut's people had kept them on hold for seven ship days -- before advising Theran authorities to allow them on the planet, and then it had taken 133 ship days to make the journey on plasma drive. They'd had to beg for extra food from what was left of the Theran Interdiction Force; much of that, they suspected, had been scavenged from a few larders that had survived destruction of their picket ships and later been salvaged.

Humans could survive on Theran food, but it seemed to come in only two flavors: none and bad. They'd spiced it up as best they could with their own dwindling rations.

Then there was the cabin fever. There was no cure for that. Tuva had tried to alleviate it through further study about the Scalantrans, the Seeders, and as much as he

could about other seeded worlds and their histories, about the origins of the Empire and the Enlightenment.

“Did you know that the Scalantrans helped create the Empire?” he asked her one day? “The Aureans had kidnapped one of their trade missions, killed and enslaved their people. So they bombed the shit out of their planet – they only had one then – but the Aureans captured some of the attacking ships and used them to—“

“There’s different versions of that story. What does it matter?”

“It proves the Scalantrans aren’t infallible... One thing I can’t figure out, though, is why they started trading with the Empire again a couple of centuries back.”

“For profit, what else? They’ll do *anything* for that.”

“And why did the Aureans *let* them?”

*That’s Tuva*, she thought. *Always full of ideas, full of questions – questions that probably don’t have any answers. At least, none we’ll ever learn.*

After finally setting down on Thera, they were dependent on the charity of a few sympathetic Belsidea – no admirers of Kozut. But there was nothing they could do to intercede with the Scalantrans.

Tuva and Asenion’s efforts to gain an audience with the Factor General had been rebuffed. What could their ragtag crew possibly have to offer the Scalantrans? And what they did have to offer wasn’t for the ears of underlings.

There things stood until the day she sought out Tuva, barely able to contain her excitement.

“I’ve got good news,” she said. “*The Capitalist Roader* has just landed.”

She could see his face light up with his own excitement.

\* \* \*

“We had rather been expecting your call,” Travel Captain Zuminga said. “Indeed, had you not done so, we would have contacted you. The details of your pursuit by the Aureans were... interesting.”

They could almost *feel* the Scalantran’s rumbling voice over the comlink.

“The less said about that on com, the better,” said Captain Asenion. “We need to meet face-to-face. Your trade captain should also be present.”

“I was about to make the same suggestion.”

*She’s quick on the uptake, Prima thought. But from what Tuva’s been telling me, the Scalantrans always are. That’s how they got where they are.*

“Katanem is occupied with the trade fair at present,” Zuminga reminded Asenion. “But given that our rendezvous with the *Spirit of Commerce* had to be aborted, we lack some of the goods we had intended to market here. Our business with Thera will therefore be concluded sooner, and less profitably, than we had anticipated.”

“We are sorry to hear that,” Asenion said.

*Not really, Prima thought. But it was the right thing to say.*

“It could have been far worse,” Zuminga pointed out. “Had you not distracted the Aureans. Our League is still neutral. But then, so was Belside. So is Vendor.”

“Please inform us when we can meet with you and Katanem, securely.”

“We shall inform you.”

“Can we trust them?” Asenion asked Tuva after signing off.

“We can trust them not to tell anyone outside the League. Beyond that, we have to look to our own interest, as they will surely look to theirs. We’ll need to do some hard bargaining. But we’re in a good bargaining position; they have everything to gain.”

\* \* \*

The weather was perfect the next day. No time for hanging around the *Asman*. Tuva turned to Prima: “Come on. Come outside with me. Let’s enjoy some real air.”

Prima saw the smile on his face and didn’t hesitate to join him. When they got outside she took a deep breath. “This is good. Going back and forth to that meeting with Kozut yesterday, I didn’t have a chance to enjoy it.”

The spaceport was on the outskirts of the city close to a wooded area. Tuva grabbed Prima’s hand and headed towards the woods at a loping jog. Then he dropped her hand and pointed: “Race you to that tree.”

Prima got there a few seconds after Tuva, panting for breath. “Damn, I’m out of shape. I hate the tiny gym on the ship, but I should’ve used it more.”

“Winner gets paid by the loser,” Tuva said.

“And what would you like for payment?”

Tuva put his hand behind Prima’s head and lowered his face to hers. She felt the light pressure of his lips on hers and then his tongue parted her lips. Her tongue stretched to meet his. She tasted him and breathed in the scent of his mouth.

When he broke off the kiss she laughed. “All payments should be so enjoyable. Is that all you want from me?”

Prima could see his eyes smolder. “No Prima, that’s not all I want from you,” he said, his voice husky. He drew her further into the woods, until they came to a small clearing. “Does this remind you of anything?” he asked.

“Yes. But I don’t feel despair now. With the *Capitalist Roder* on our side, we can convince the Scalantrans to help us.”

“So let’s celebrate. Let’s celebrate together.” His lips were on her throat and he was unbuttoning her shirt.

She pushed his hands away. “Bet I can undress faster than you can.”

He took off his shirt and then his shoes and pants and sat on the ground. “I win again.”

“No, no,” she said. “Socks count.” She stepped out of her panties and threw them at him. “I won this time.”

When his socks were finally removed, she joined him. “Now I want payment.”

“And that would be?”

“I want you to kiss me.”

He looked perplexed. “But I’ve done that already.”

“All over. I want you to kiss every part of my body.”

When he didn’t do anything, Prima said: “What’s the problem?”

“I’m just trying to figure out where to start.”

Prima laughed. “I’ll help you. Start at the top and work down. Then flip me over and use your imagination.” She lay face down on the ground.

His lips caressed her hair. “Your beautiful, shiny hair was the first thing I noticed about you.” She gasped with pleasure when his lips touched the nape of her neck. Then

her arms and her back. She was breathing heavily when he kissed each side of her ass. He parted her legs and let his tongue briefly lick between them, eliciting a low moan. Then down each leg. She giggled when he brushed the dirt off the soles of her feet before kissing them. And then he sucked each toe.

He gently rolled her over. She saw the excitement in his face and the extent of his arousal. She wanted to stroke him, to feel him in her hand, but knew it would be even better if she waited.

He kissed her forehead, her eyes and nose. Then his tongue flicked across her lips before plunging into her mouth. She couldn't decide if she wanted him to stay there or to continue his journey down her body. Then his lips were on her chin, then on the hollow of her neck.

She felt his hand on her breast and pushed it away. "Against the rules. Mouth only."

He groaned. "I'll have to remember not to lose bets to you." His tongue flicked her hard nipple and then took it into his mouth, sucking hungrily. And then the other breast. This time, he took as much of her breast in his mouth as he could. "Small, but delicious," he said.

And then his lips went down her belly, his tongue flicked her navel. She wanted to feel his hands in her pubic hair, but remembered the rules she had made.

She parted her legs for him but was disappointed when his lips went down one leg and up the other. He raised his head and said: "I always save the best for last."

With a sigh, she spread her legs wider and was rewarded with the sight of his head between her legs and the feel of his tongue licking her, lapping up her wetness.

He probed her with his tongue and nibbled at her with his lips and teeth. She grabbed his head and rotated her hips and screamed in delight when she came.

He looked into her eyes. "Have I adequately paid my debt?"

"More than adequately."

"Anything else I can do for you?" he asked with a wicked grin on his face.

She stroked him, reveling in his hardness. "I think you know what you can do for me."

He entered her swiftly, but then stopped. "Last time was so fast. This time I want to make it last."

She wrapped her arms and legs around him and drew him in even deeper. She felt his slow movements, matched them, and sighed in contentment. Her hands roamed over his body, feeling the hard contours of his ass, pulling him in to her. He seemed to fill her, but more than physically.

All that time on the ship, wondering what she wanted from him, getting to know him, frustrated at not being able to be alone with him. Now she knew. She had shared her despair with him and now she was sharing her joy. She wanted to share those emotions with him and everything in between. She wanted to know him physically and emotionally. She wanted to share all with him.

The pulse of their lovemaking quickened. She could feel the heat of his body, hear his ragged breathing. She arched her back and clenched his ass. Her mouth slackened. She looked at him and the intensity of his gaze sent her over the edge. She screamed out her joy and felt him spasm within her.

After a while, when her breathing had returned to normal she whispered: “Much better, much better.”

“Much better than what?” he asked, raising his head from her breast.

“Than the first time.”

“Yes. Definitely better than the first time.”

“Though I certainly don’t regret it. You gave me solace.”

“As you did me,” he said.

“And now we’ve celebrated together.”

“I’d like to celebrate with you some more, Prima. But they might be wondering where we are. Time to return. Damn! It’s going to be hard following ship customs.”

“Maybe,” she said tentatively. “Maybe it’s time to relax some ship customs.”

## XII

It was a private conference room, a *very* private conference room. Not unlike the sort that could be found at corporate and institutional offices back on Belside.

Except that the ceiling was too high. Except that the conference table was also too high, as were the chairs – all built to Scalantran scale. The Scalantrons were not accustomed to human visitors or, for that matter, any visitors not of their own kind.

The Factor General's name was Resorjem. Tuva could tell that he was a male from his large ears with elongated lobes – the name with its characteristic male ending only confirmed his observation. Apart from the smaller ears of females, there were no obvious sexual differences. Male and female alike stood seven feet tall, and were covered with fine, brick red fur.

Resorjem was seated comfortably on one side of the table, flanked by Zuminga and Katanem. Seated across from the Factor General, less comfortably, was Captain Asenion, flanked by Tuva and Prima. They ignored the discomfort, knowing that their hosts meant no disrespect. Indeed, their hopes were as bright as the Theran sun.

“We have found it expedient to inform the Factor General,” Zuminga had told the captain when she got back to him about scheduling a meeting. “In person, naturally, not by com. We will be expecting you at his office tomorrow morning, 9.65 hours local time. We expect you to send a party of three, the same as our own.

Captain Asenion had barely been able to contain himself.

“I wouldn’t have dared ask for this,” he said.

“They aren’t just playing around,” Tuva said. “They mean business.”

“We’ll be able to tell our people that help is on the way,” Prima said joyfully. “Kozut’s bunch will have a fit.”

*And we’ll be able to get on with our lives,* Tuva thought, stealing a glance at her, *Not today, not tomorrow, but soon.*

There was never any doubt as to who their three emissaries would be.

\* \* \*

“Let the record show that these proceedings are not being recorded,” Resorjem said as soon as the formal introductions had been concluded and the parties had taken their seats. “Our discussion is to be exploratory only.”

“We have a great deal to explore,” Captain Asenion said.

“We have already surmised that you have a new propulsion system,” the Factor General continued without any further preliminaries. “The *Capitalist Roader* has shared

its records with me, and only with me. I want to make that clear at the outset. I expect the same clarity on your part.”

“We are here to seek help for our world,” Asenion replied. “We want to restore our cities, our surface technological infrastructure and our orbital industries. We want to make Belside a fit place to live again, for ourselves and our children.”

“An understandable ambition, and a worthy one. But, unfortunately, one we are not able to support.”

Prima was stunned. She could see that Eriq and Tuva were likewise stunned.

Silence reigned for a few moments. Then.

“You know what we have to offer you,” Asenion said. “Its value to you, its value to countless worlds, is beyond calculation. And it is ours to trade for the salvation of our own world. *We* created this technology; no one else had even dreamed it possible.”

Prima couldn't read Resorjem's expression, but of a sudden she felt a chill run through her.

“You deserve to know the truth of the matter,” the Factor General said now. “You must never tell anyone outside this room how you came by this. We can concoct a story that the Velorians debriefed a defector from the Aurean embassy before Thera broke off relations with the Empire and – without naming any names – you can attribute it to that source. What I have to tell you is this: the Empire will *never* allow civilization on Belside again.”

For Prima it was a moment of utter disbelief. Asenion was their leader, but he seemed too shocked to respond.

“But *why?*” she asked, breaking the silence around her. “What have we ever done to offend the Aureans?”

“Nothing,” Resorjem said, the rumbling of his voice filling the room. “It is not about Belside. It has never been about Belside. It is about the Vendorians.”

“I don’t understand,” Asenion said, finding his own voice at last.

“The Vendorians sell their steel to us. They sell their steel to the Enlightenment. They sell their steel to neutral worlds. They do not sell their steel to the Empire. This puts the Empire at a disadvantage. The Empire needed to send a message to Vendor. They dared not attack us. The worlds of the Enlightenment are too well defended. But a neutral world, a defenseless world and – ideally for their purpose – a world producing ships from Vendorian hulls... That would indeed send a message. And the Empire was so determined to send that message that it concealed its plans from its own embassy in Zurin. But Vendor was informed immediately afterwards. You can be certain of that. You can be certain that any Vendorian ships entering the Belstar system will be destroyed. You can be certain that any efforts on your part to undo what the Aureans did to Belside will be undone – and, this time, without leaving any survivors.”

Prima couldn’t take it any more. To have had their hopes raised so high – and to have those hopes dashed. To be scorned by the Therans, by their own people here... and now by the Scalantrans. She could barely contain her rage. She couldn’t read the Factor General’s face, but she imagined that she read condescension, even contempt. What could you expect of a people who had no business but business, who lived only for profit, who knew nothing of benevolence... or even pity?

She glanced at her companions. Tuva was looking into space, as if nothing were going on around him, as if his thoughts were entirely elsewhere. Eriq seemed alert but impassive as he looked Resorjem in the eyes.

“You have called this an exploratory meeting,” he finally said. “But it seems that we have nothing to explore.”

“We cannot explore false hopes,” the Factor General said. “It was necessary to make that clear immediately, out of a sense of fairness, painful as it must be to all of you. But there *are* other options to explore.”

\* \* \*

“Scattering us to the winds, that’s what it amounts to.”

Tuva was furious when he returned to the *Asman* with Eriq and Prima. He’d done his best to hide his feelings from the Scalantrans, but...

Fortunately, the captain had either felt the same about their proposal, or realized that the rest of them would. So he had told Resorjem that his side would take it under advisement.

It was a generous offer. That was the hardest part about it. The Factor General would throw his full support behind an emigration program that would find the Belsidea new homes on other worlds. Advanced Second Generation worlds like Dancer, Selene and Tazzi. The Scalantrans would use their influence with these worlds, offering new trade incentives.

“But no single planet can be expected to bear the entire burden of your exodus,” Resorjem had made it clear. “It will be difficult enough as it is for local authorities to deal with issues of housing and employment and assimilation. The most progressive seeded

worlds are protective of their own histories, their own languages, and their own cultures – no matter that these have evolved radically from those of their own remote ancestors.”

“Surely you can see that we feel the same way about ours,” Eriq had protested.

“Your distant ancestors came mostly from a place on Old Earth called Akkadia,” Resorjerm had argued. “There is no longer a place called Akkadia. You are no longer Akkadians. There are no longer any Akkadians anywhere. Is this truly a loss?”

It was a logical argument, but logic wasn’t the issue here. Loyalty was. Back on the ship, he could vent about that. Eriq could vent, They could all vent.

Except Prima.

She remained silent through their venting, until they were all vented out. When she spoke, it was very calmly – but with conviction.

“I think we should consider this,” she said. “We have to think of what’s really best for those people back there. Not what we’d like. Not even what *they’d* like. What they *need*. We can’t throw away this chance out of foolish pride.”

### XIII

What was the matter with Tuva?

Prima couldn’t understand the look on his face when Resorjerm had offered to help the Belsidea settle elsewhere – still less his outbursts afterwards. The Scalantran Factor General was doing his best to help them, and Tuva had scorned him – he was even urging the others to reject the plan.

“Snatching defeat from the jaws of victory,” she muttered. “That’s what it amounts to.”

“What?”

Chief Engineer Damirzadeh had just come into their compartment.

“Just thinking out loud, Fareh. About that offer from the Scalantans.”

“I heard they could send us *anywhere*,” Fareh said. “We might never see each other again.”

“That’s silly. They’d keep us together. Any people who wanted to be together would stay together. The only Belsidea you’d never see again would be people you’ve never seen anyway, people you wouldn’t even *want* to see.”

“It still doesn’t seem right,” Fareh insisted. “We’re a people, just like the peoples on all those other planets. Only they’d want us to be like them instead of like us. We’d never feel at home.”

“Give it a generation,” Prima said. “We Kelsors...”

*But we no longer exist.*

“You *did* feel at home there, didn’t you? Or was it just the Institute?”

Prima suddenly realized that the Institute had *been* Belside for her, that it had been her whole life there. The Institute was something they could recreate anywhere – as long as they could find the right people. But would the right people all follow her? People like Fareh?

“Home is where our work is,” she said. “Can you understand that?”

“No,” Fareh said. “As much as I care about our work, I don’t understand that.”

\* \* \*

What did it mean to be Belsidea? Tuva wondered.

It had nothing to do with ancient Akkadia. He'd grown up knowing the name, and little else. He knew that his language must have its roots there, but that it had surely changed beyond recognition over millennia. His own name, and other names he knew, might have meant something in that old language, but they were only names now.

He'd read somewhere that the original settlers had worshipped deities named Sin and Ishtar and Shamash, who were identified with heavenly bodies – he didn't have any idea which – seen from Old Earth. But religions apparently didn't travel well; the old deities of Akkadia were of interest only to scholars now – if any Belsidea scholars still lived. Chances were the Scalantrans knew more about them than anyone on Belside had – or could look them up, at any rate.

Resorjem thought he knew it all. But he knew nothing. He didn't know the people at the Encampment, the people who sweated every day to keep their community alive. Even Layosh Koidy, the middle-aged ex-banker he'd left in charge.

Tuva hadn't thought much of Layosh when they'd met in the tunnel, just after Zurin died in nuclear fire. He'd been at his worst; he'd been in a panic. Tuva still remembered the look on his face when he'd told him the capital was gone: Layosh had known at that moment that his family was gone, his friends were gone, everyone he knew was gone – all reason for living was gone. Tuva had still had hope that day, that hour, however faint it might have been.

The wonder of it was that Layosh hadn't lost his head, as so many had on that day, at that hour. People were looking for guidance, looking for answers. Layosh had been a mover and shaker in Zurin; his bank, Tuva learned later, had had investments in

everything from residential and office towers in the cities to factories and mines on the moons and asteroids. But they were of no account now.

A moment after he had called the man an idiot – he didn't yet even know who he was – he explained that he wasn't some high official, just a regional forest manager. For some reason that seemed to have impressed the man.

"Listen to *him*," the ruined banker had shouted at the panic-stricken crowd.

An act of pure faith, it had seemed at the time, an act Tuva had known he would have to live up to. Tuva hadn't understood Layosh's motivation until he overheard a conversation between him and an associate:

"Why did you let him take over?" the other man had asked. "I can't understand a man with your power following a man like that."

"Don't you get it?" Layosh had said. "Our world no longer exists. We have to live in his world now. So we have to follow him. And learn from him."

And Layosh had played by Tuva's rules, doing his share of the grunt work as well as helping Tuva organize the teams that planned the grunt work. Not once did he refer to his class origins, or try to impress anyone with his past accomplishments. It was only what he could accomplish *now*, and help others accomplish, that mattered.

Being Belsidea had nothing to do with customs – bright clothes for men, drab for women. It had nothing to do with living primarily in cities, leaving most of the countryside in its natural state – although that was a blessing now, terrible as the loss of at least 90% of the population might be. It had nothing to do with relocating heavy industry into space. And surely none of those things had anything to do with an ancient people on

Earth called the Akkadians. And Layosh, like Prima, wasn't even of Akkadian descent; his family had immigrated from a planet called Ujvilag centuries ago.

No, it was their spirit of independence and invention, of initiative and mutual aid, of enterprise and industriousness – the spirit they all shared, even in face of calamity – that made them Belsidea.

It came to him with a flash of understanding.

They would need a new world, founded on that same spirit.

\* \* \*

Prima's sleep was troubled that night.

She hadn't expected, and had certainly never wanted to quarrel with Fareh. But she had been at the meeting with the Factor General and the chief engineer hadn't. How could Fareh appreciate the logistical nightmare involved in transporting survivors of Belside to new homes?

Few Scalantran ships were equipped to transport passengers, and those which were had been designed for the very wealthy – or for diplomats on official business. At a stretch, the Factor General had told them, they could carry a few hundred at a time. As for traditional Scalantran traders, they might be adapted to carry perhaps a few dozen each.

"You understand, of course, that this also depends on the ships being equipped with your new drive," Resorjem had advised them. "That is necessary in order for our ships to maintain normal schedules in addition to transporting your people to seeded worlds willing to accept them. It is also necessary to minimize food requirements by shortening the journeys in real time."

It would be an enormously costly undertaking, and could be justified only by the enormous savings in time and expense afforded by the Quantum Electric Drive. And at the very least, it would take years – even generations – to complete the operation.

“We must inform incoming ships one by one, and persuade them to take time at the System Yard for refitting, on the understanding that your drive will enable them to make up for lost time. We will establish facilities at the Yard for you to repair your drive and produce new ones for others. We will require exclusive rights to the drive for some mutually agreeable period.”

From exchanges of information between ships over hundreds, even thousands of years, the Scalantrans had an immense data base on seeded worlds. They knew which were open to immigration, and which trade ships called on those worlds. Because most such worlds were not on direct routes from Thera, it would be necessary to arrange for transfers of passengers from one ship to another at intermediate points.

“Or, if you are fortunate, some of your people might be acceptable to worlds on established trade routes that have never adopted an official policy on immigration,” the Factor General had said. “In that case, the captains would invite them to take advantage of the opportunity.”

It would be an invitation they couldn't refuse, Prima was sure. But they'd get over it. They'd find new lives on other worlds, good lives – not the hand-to-mouth existence that was all Tuva could offer on Belside. The captain would see it that way. The crew would see it that way.

Even Tuva would see it that way, eventually, because it was the *only* way.

\* \* \*

Tuva was nervous about broaching the idea to Prima the next day. He sort of backed into it instead of coming straight to the point, because he wanted her to know what *led* to the point.

“Suppose they split us up?” he asked. “What group will you go with?”

“Why, the ship's crew, of course.”

“And what about me?”

“You'll come with us.”

“And what about the people in the Park? They've become my people in the last year.”

“There wouldn't be *room* for them. Not unless we could find a passenger ship. If we could do that, you know I'd want to bring your people. Maybe we could send them by stages on other ships, but that would take longer. Years longer.”

“What about all the other camps? There are probably cousins of my own people there. Even if there aren't, they'll want to live on a world of their own – not as pathetic refugees, scattered who knows where, treated as second-class citizens leading second-hand lives, expected to adopt languages and customs and patterns of thought and systems of value that mean nothing to them.”

“Sometimes people have to change. Sometimes people have to make difficult choices. That's what my family had to do when we left Igoybe. They had to look forward and not back, and they never regretted their decision – even though it meant leaving behind everything they owned, everything they had ever known.”

“But that was one family,” Tuva said. “And they *chose* where they were going – chose Belside for its freedom of science and freedom of commerce, for the opportunity

it offered the best and the brightest. It was the same with Layosh Koidy's family; they wanted a chance to be honest entrepreneurs. Whenever they came, wherever they came from, the people who settled on Belside helped build the kind of world where they could hold their heads high and know that their lives were worthwhile."

"We have to let go of that now. There's no other choice."

"That's the whole point. The Scalantans aren't offering us any choice. They'll send us... wherever they send us. Maybe it won't make a difference to some people, maybe we can adapt to... wherever we find ourselves. But what we lived for on Belside – I think that's worth saving."

"It's past saving. You have to face up to reality. I'm a scientist. I have to deal with reality."

"And I *don't*? I've had to deal with reality ever since Destruction Day. I've had to deal with it at the camp, and I have to deal with it now. So do you. Think about what your grandfather would have wanted."

Prima thought a moment. "Grandpa," she said hesitatingly. And then she said with conviction: "He'd want me to carry on with his work, to recreate the Institute."

"But how do you know you'd be allowed to do that on a world of the Scalantans' choosing? How do you know that they'd let us choose the most qualified people back on Belside for the Institute – or allow them to go with you?"

"But what else can we do?"

"We have to find a *new* world, an unsettled world, a world that we can *choose*, a world that we can call our own and make our own. If we can't save our planet, we can save what it *represents*. We've got to *try*. We owe that to the dead, and to the living..."

and to each other.”

He looked into her eyes, hoping to see understanding.

She drew him into her arms and held him close.

“Perhaps their way isn’t the only way, after all,” she said. “Just *perhaps*.”

“To try. That’s all I’m asking.”

## XIV

So here they were in Berth 81-Q at Yoparos Shipyard.

The Therans hadn’t exactly welcomed them, but the Scalantrans had guaranteed the rental – the rental included whatever equipment and materials were needed.

But almost all they had to show for it was growing pains.

The control module for a Quantum Electric Drive wasn’t built, it was *grown*. Prima could access her grandfather’s programs in the ship’s computer; the problem was mating it with the Theran nanotech platform, which didn’t match what he had used to produce the first experimental modules and the final design back at the Kelsorian Institute.

There was nothing for it but to study up on the Theran system, making seemingly endless calculations and re-calculations. It was like learning a new language, and there wasn’t a deepteach program for it. Fareh, the only other crew member with theoretical as well as practical knowledge of the system, helped as much as she could. But still...

Prima was losing sleep, feeling irritable, and often too tired and too irritable to make love with Tuva. She was even cross with him at time, feeling – while not actually voicing – a recurrent doubt about the wisdom of the plan itself. She felt bad about that,

but he never complained. He'd offer her hugs, words of reassurance.

They'd managed to repair the entangler, at least: cause for celebration, even if everybody knew the *Asman* wouldn't be going anywhere for a while. Resorjem wanted a demonstration of the QED; not, he insisted, that he doubted the word of the *Capitalist Roader's* captains; it was that he was taking a heavy responsibility – heavier than any a Factor General had ever faced. Well, any that he'd ever heard of.

But a demonstration wouldn't mean anything unless they could also demonstrate that the technology was replicable, that the seed ships *could* be built. Tuva and Prima had been putting off the Factor General and the captains on an any-day-now, any-day...

Prima suspected they were getting pretty impatient by now.

\* \* \*

They'd thought convincing the Scalantrans would be the hard part.

They were wrong.

It wasn't that Resorjem and the captains of the *Capitalist Roader* had been an easy sell for Tuva's project. It had taken days of hard bargaining, and the deal they had finally worked out was both more and less than what they had bargained on.

"We're not in the seeding business," the Factor General told them at first. "We can't disrupt our schedules to accommodate a seeding mission, even if we had suitable ships or a suitable destination."

"You have contacts with the Seeders," Tuva argued. "They have suitable ships."

"Only when *they* wish to contact *us*," Resorjem countered. "Never the other way around. We have never even *seen* their seed ships."

"You could *build* ships adequate to our needs."

“Are you insane? Do you think we are insane? Such ships would be of no use whatever to us, and yet you expect us to invest in them?”

“You could use them afterwards as passenger ships.”

“*Passenger* ships?”

That was it for the first day.

They came back the next day, and Tuva could barely conceal his glee as Prima presented calculations demonstrating that the Quantum Electric Drive could reduce travel time sufficiently to make interstellar passenger traffic an everyday practicality rather than a rarity.

“We leave it to you to determine how *profitable* a practicality it could be for you,” she concluded.

Zuminga and Kantenem looked at Resorjem. Resorjem looked back at the captains of the *Capitalist Roader*. Tuva couldn’t read their expressions, of course, but he was willing to bet he knew what was on their minds.

“We must discuss this further tomorrow,” Resorjem declared.

That turned out to be it for the second day.

“That’s my girl,” Tuva whispered in Prima’s ear as they stepped out of the Factor General’s office and into the bright sunshine – far brighter than any on Belside – of a Theran afternoon. “I love you so much.”

Caution had been thrown to the winds aboard the *Asman*. They could make love whenever they wanted, as long as they kept it behind closed doors. Tuva was so proud of Prima he could barely contain himself...

When Fareh saw the looks on their faces as they boarded the ship, she smiled at them. "It looks as if you have good news," she said.

"Very good news, I think," Prima said.

"Well, I've got good news for you. Feel free to use the compartment. I'm going to be... otherwise engaged for a while."

And she gave them a wink.

As soon as they were in the compartment, Tuva took Prima in his arms to kiss her passionately. His engorged manhood ground against her and she threw her arms around his neck. His hands moved down her back to cup her ass cheeks and press her even closer to him...

They were lying together, happily exhausted after long and leisurely lovemaking, when there was a discreet knock at the door.

"Just a minute," Prima called as she and Tuva hurriedly put on their clothes.

"Are you going to tell me all the delicious details?" Fareh asked after Tuva had made his exit.

"No," Prima said. But she followed it with a smile.

"Me neither," Fareh said. She smiled too.

\* \* \*

The third day wasn't so hopeful.

"We do have some knowledge of untenanted worlds," Resorjem told them. "But they are far distant. Furthermore, the Seeders undoubtedly have first claim on them. We therefore avoid those worlds, lest we offend the Seeders."

"Do you have any way of contacting the Seeders?" Captain Asenion pressed.

“It is as I have said: we do not contact *them*, they contact *us*.”

“Our ship was contacted several generations ago, regarding trade with Dancer,” Katanem interjected at this point. “We don’t know how they found us, or why they chose us – the planet was not far off our existing route, but it was closer to others. They filled us in on the local history and culture, and gave my predecessor and his staff deep-teach in the language. After that, nobody on the *Capitalist Roader* ever saw them again.”

“What did they look like?” Prima asked.

“They looked like you, or so I’ve been told. Humans are all pretty much alike. Except for the skin color. They were not dark like the people of Dancer.”

“Where did they come from?”

“We didn’t ask, and they didn’t tell. But they must have been from a previously settled human world. A very advanced one. There must be a number of worlds out there far more advanced than yours – after all, the Seeders have been about their business for hundreds of generations.”

“Who seeded the Seeders?”

“I do not know,” Katanem said.

“Nor do I,” Resorjem added. “And if I did, I would not discuss it. There are certain subjects that are extremely sensitive, it is said, to the Seeders – and therefore to us. In any case, pursuing this subject will get us nowhere. The matter at hand is whether we can find a means to transport your people as a people, and whether we can find a world to receive them. The first, as Prima has demonstrated, is feasible. The second is at best problematical.”

“Can you give us access to any relevant survey data?” Tuva asked.

“We will take that under advisement.”

“What are we to do in the meantime?” Captain Asension asked.

“There is a great deal you could be doing,” the Factor General said. “That goes beyond effecting repairs to your ship. It is reasonable for us to expect you to prepare a demonstration for us, and to further demonstrate the capability to produce more drives of the same nature. Otherwise, the investment in seed ships would hardly be justified. We would also expect you to provide a drive unit to the *Capitalist Roder* as an earnest of our future relationship.”

“We will be pleased to receive the first,” Travel Captain Chuminga added.

“Arrangements will be made for rental of space and equipment at the orbital shipyard,” Resorjem concluded. “Please keep us advised of your progress. We shall call another meeting at the appropriate time.”

So here they were in Berth 81-Q at Yoparos Shipyard.

## XV

It was shortly after the news that a Velorian Gatekeeper detachment had arrived in the Theran system that Captain Asension was approached by the yardmaster, Jendrel Ipatti himself.

Asension was with Prima at the time, getting an update on the nanotech problem. It wasn't much of an update, and she knew that the Scalantrans wouldn't be any happier about that than she was. Very unhappy, in fact.

Ipatti came up to them without so much as a by-your-leave, and seemed to know exactly what as well as who he was looking for.

“We understand that you are in need of assistance,” Ipatti said, after formally introducing himself.

Asenion and Prima had the presence of mind to look him right in the face without betraying either amusement or disgust. That was despite the fact that Theran passersby had given them cold looks and the cold shoulder. Perhaps they considered their people put upon by the Scalantrans as well as themselves.

The shipyard had started as a family business, they had been told, and it was still run by the family under contract with the government, but they’d never expected to see the man in charge – or any other Therans, for that matter, up close and personal.

“The Scalantrans have informed you?”

“The Velorians. The Scalantrans share certain intelligence with them and they in turn share it with us, Thera having now acceded to the Enlightenment. They have taken a keen interest in your project.”

Prima looked around. There didn’t seem to anybody else within earshot – no sign or sound of activity in neighboring berths of the chilly repair section with its bare steel walls and alleys. She hadn’t taken notice of the silence until now, but she realized now that it couldn’t be by accident.

“Our arrangement is with the Scalantrans,” Asenion said.

“The Velorians have an arrangement of their own with the Scalantrans, the terms of which are... closely guarded. I mention this only to make my position and theirs clear to you; it should not be mentioned again. Suffice it to say that the Velorians are taking an interest in the military potential of your project, leaving the commercial applications to the Scalantrans, as they should be.”

“We have no interest in military applications.”

“The Velorians will brook no objections in this matter.”

“We are prepared to offer our technology to them in the same terms as agreed to by the Scalantrans; neither more nor less.”

“I am sure that will be acceptable. But first you must have a technology to offer. Expect a visit from one of our nanotechnologists, who is familiar with Belsidea as well as Theran programming.”

Ipatti made his formal farewell, and took his leave. Within a few moments, shipyard workers began appearing on the glideway, returning to neighboring berths to work on whatever they were working on.

\* \* \*

Tuva had missed it all; he'd been working in the ship's archive, trying again to find leads of unsettled worlds. He didn't trust the Scalantrans to come up with anything. Why should they?

*We're just a handful of people, and they're the lords of the starways, he thought. They can just wait us out, tell us they tried their best – and how are we to know better?*

The archive was thorough in its own way; it had detailed entries on the Seeded worlds and rather sketchier ones on alien worlds – except for those like Thera that were in close contact with Seeded worlds.

Thera and Belside were especially unusual, not only in being nexus worlds with three wormholes each, but adjacent to each other. That may have been the reason for Belside having been Seeded so early, or even Seeded at all – humans had lived under

a yellow sun on Old Earth, and nearly all the other Seeded worlds had yellow or at least orange suns.

Tuva had lived under a red sun all his life, and had never seen anything strange about the brassy sky or the short local years. Thera's sun made him blink, sometimes even sneeze – Fareh thought it was some sort of allergic reaction and had given him a pill for it. Being on ship, and the ship berthed in the yard, seemed to be a better remedy.

Tuva was tired and irritable. They were all tired and irritable. The others could at least work off their frustrations in bed, but Prima had been too busy with the nanotech interface problem, and never in the mood for making love.

When she and Asenion interrupted him at his own labors, he was even ready to snap at them. But he held his tongue.

“We've got good news,” the captain said.

“Help is on the way,” Prima added.

Only, Tuva was still irritated after they'd explained the details.

“So now we can *go*,” he said. “But where do we go *to*?”

His words hung in the air between them, like the chill of the shipyard itself, and he instantly regretted them, seeing the look on Prima's face. She didn't seem to know what to say, so Asenion tried to calm him.

“We're not giving up,” he said. “You can depend on that. Everyone on board is on your side on this – it's our side now, *ours*. There's got to be a place for us – a place within range. And our range will be far greater. Don't forget that.”

Tuva was suddenly ashamed. After all the chances that had brought him here, after the acceptance he had found – first at the encampment, then aboard the *Asman* – he felt as if he were violating a trust, especially with Prima.

She had seen something in him, something he had not quite seen in himself – she had given him *hope*. He owed it to her to return that hope. He owed it to her to return that hope to his people back on Belside, to the crew of the ship. They had been through too much to leave him any other choice.

“I’m not giving up,” he told them. “I’ll find a way, we’ll find a way.”

There was a faint change of expression on Prima’s face. Perhaps a glimmer.

\* \* \*

The Theran’s name was Lotzi Erkkö.

He was distinguished, Prima thought – if one could call in that – by a smaller than average proboscis. But that was only on first sight and, in any case, she wasn’t into that sort of thing. What mattered was that he was an expert nanotechnology engineer.

“I can see what your problem is,” Erkkö told her, after looking over her setup.

After only a few further words, his fingers – Therans were quite dextrous – fairly flew over the keys as he created an application that would allow the *Asman*’s nanotech programming and the shipyard’s to communicate.

Prima was amazed.

“It all seems so simple,” she said. “Here I was wracking my brains for days...”

“I’ve worked with both systems, both sides of the wormhole, here at our shipyard and at your yards, and even on Belside,” he explained. “My last job there was updating the system for our embassy in Zurin, just before...”

Prima felt a tinge of sadness.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know how you must feel.”

“I made some friends there. People I lost. But not as many people as *you* lost. I try to keep that in mind. And I have to keep going. Anyway, the kind of work I do is quite remunerative.”

“But for so short an assignment?”

“There’s an old story about a man who was hired to repair a broken machine at some factory. The factory manager watched as he paced around the machine, looked it over from every angle, and finally gave it a kick. Problem solved, in a matter of minutes. But the manager was shocked to receive a bill for a thousand ozols, so he asked for an itemized bill, and he got what he asked for: Kicking the machine: 10 ozols. Knowing *where* to kick: 900 ozols.”

“And how much is *your* bill?”

“More than you could afford. But the Velorian embassy is paying for it. They also asked me to bring you something for your friend Tuva.”

“What do you know about him?”

“What you and your people told the Scalantrans, who told the Velorians, who told us. You’re quite the talk of the planet, in certain circles. And in those same circles, I can assure you, your people have attracted considerably greater sympathy than you might expect from your initial reception here. But I digress, and I have other appointments, so I leave you with this token from your unsought allies the Velorians.”

Erkko handed her a small box. Within the box was a glittering cube – not a gem, Prima knew, but an ultra-compressed computer data file.

“What *is* this?” Prima asked.

“The unabridged Galactic Grand Planetary Catalog, compiled from the records of every known wormhole and stellar system survey ever undertaken by the Seeders, the Velorians and others whose names are unknown to you and will remain so. And yes, reformatted to be compatible with your onboard system.”

## XVI

Outside, the great ship was beginning to take shape, the ship that was to be the prototype for all that came after it.

Inside, Prima and Tuva were busy with their own work – she with growing QED modules, he with searching the Grand Planetary Catalog. It had been a few weeks now, local time.

The *Asman* was taking Resorjem on a jaunt around the system – it was pretty much a formality at this point, but it was part of the deal. The *Capitalist Roader*, having remained insystem on faith that its promised module would allow it to make up its lost time on its trading circuit, was about to have its faith rewarded.

But Prima wasn’t taking things on faith, Tuva was glad to see.

“We’ve got to keep the secret to ourselves,” she told him. “You were right about that. And the Scalantrans and any other customers will have to live with it.”

What they’d have to live with was a security code she had devised that would cause the module to crash beyond any possibility of repair or analysis if anyone tried to tamper with it. To ensure that nobody would be trapped in space, however, whether by attempted tampering or just some unforeseen breakdown, each client ship would be

supplied with two spares at no additional cost. Of course, the additional outlay would be factored into the original cost. It was a good deal all around.

*To deal with the Scalantrans, think like the Scalantrans*, he mused. It had been his idea, but without Prima nothing would have come of it.

Call it synergy, Or call it love. He was so *proud* of her when she told him, and he showed it in making love with her more ardently than ever before, evoking screams of pleasure that might have woken the neighborhood if they hadn't had a comfortable (and soundproofed) room at the spacemen's hostel, with a comfortable bed and even room service – another perk from their Scalantran patrons. With the Asman away, they had all the time they wanted for each other now.

When they weren't making love, and exchanging words of love, they would speak of many things. It was during one of their private conversations that the security issue had come up. Tuva was trying to think ahead, about the logistics of resettlement – not just the new ships, but finding crews to man them among the Belsidea here and back in the camps on their homeworld.

"If we can't fly our own ships, nobody will take us seriously," he said. "Nobody will respect us. We'll be beholden to them, and they'll never let us forget it."

"They'll still be beholden to us for the QED."

"Unless they figure out how to duplicate it. That could be a risk if they have their own people on board. We won't be able to watch all of them, every minute. And what if some of them are agents of the Empire?"

"You worry too much."

“You worry too little. This is about survival, and our survival as a people depends on having a solid economic foundation. We can colonize a new planet, but then what? If we don’t have any resources, or any way to get them, we might as well be back at the camps.”

She looked annoyed. But a few days later, she was overjoyed.

\* \* \*

The colony ship was far too large to build in the *Asman’s* berth, or any other. It was being assembled outside the shipyard, in hard vacuum. Theran workers were in charge of that, using a Seeder design somehow purloined by the Scalantrans.

Prima suited up today, as she’d done now and then to check out the progress, to answer any questions they might have. She thought it was a waste of time, but it was part of the deal with the Scalantrans and the Therans.

From outside, the Yoparos Shipyard was a hodgepodge, with no more sense of form and pattern than the assemblages children made with blocks. It had simply grown by accretion. But if you looked at it a certain way, it made a certain amount of sense after all. The blocks didn’t get in each other’s way, they didn’t block access to other blocks. True, some of the passages were narrow, but those were reserved for smaller ships like the *Asman*. It all worked out.

The Theran work boss was there, right on time. She couldn’t see his face through the reflective faceplate of his suit, but she could hear his voice through her suit com.

“You’ll see that structural members 13 through 24 are now in place,” he told her. “All were certified as meeting quality standards at the primary nanotech facility, as you’ll also see.”

He displayed a slate that confirmed the certifications. She could have visited the facility to see the same records, but the Theran authorities wanted things done this way. Truth be told, she didn't mind getting out of Berth 81-Q once in a while. To see the ship grow first hand against the blackness of space, to feel the infinite about her...

She'd never had any problems with the colony ship project. The Therans were professionals; they knew what they were doing. They were also well paid, what with unlimited credit from the Scalantrans and the Velorians.

When she was through for the day with growing QED modules and testing them, or with the tours of inspection, Prima joined Tuva to make love – or check out the Planetary Catalog. Usually both. They loved to watch images of dozens of unsettled worlds swim onto the computer screen, along with descriptive notes – all following a classification system that went back to the first Seeder expeditions.

It had all been wondrous at first, the patterns of otherworldly continents and seas, weather systems and seasonal changes and, especially, the alien life forms. There were worlds where animals had six or even eight legs, where flying creatures were like living balloons rather than birds, where roving plants followed the sun, where a forest might consist of a single tree that put down extra trunks as it grew.

But after a while, it became frustrating.

“More of the same,” Tuva complained one night. “Just further away.”

“More of the same,” she knew, meant survey listings for A-Prime, B-Prime, C-Prime – all worlds with yellow suns, ranked according to factors like climate and ratio of land to water and accessibility to trade routes. Higher rankings meant that the Seeders

must have them reserved. Then there were the D-Prime and E-Prime worlds – mostly desert, mostly wintry, too far off the beaten track, whatever.

“Beyond that we get into sub-prime worlds,” he told her early on. “I don’t want to go there.”

“Nobody can live there?” she asked.

“Nobody would want to.”

She encouraged him to keep searching the prime worlds, just the same. But he wasn’t so sure.

“I think I’m missing something this way,” he said. “And when I figure out what, you’ll want to kick me, I’ll want to kick myself.”

Then came the night she got to kick him.

She was just coming off a long shift that day, after checking out progress on the colony ship and seeing the latest QED through gestation, when he called on the com.

“I think I’ve found it!” he said, his excitement evident in his voice. “I’ve already kicked myself. I should have paid more attention to those subprime worlds.”

She did not walk, but ran to their quarters.

He had the image on the screen. It didn’t look like much: a reddish world under a reddish sun. Lots of scrubby vegetation, but no trees; an animal with spidery limbs and large eyes. Another image revealed a sea with primitive fish-like creatures.

The world didn’t look particularly inviting. But the data display indicated that it was quite suitable for humans and other Terran and Terran-friendly life forms in terms of climate and atmospheric mix. It got sufficient light from the primary star in its system,

and sufficient heat from the red-brown dwarf companion it orbited – otherwise, it would have been an iceball.

“It’s in a system called Outremort 666,” he told her. “Named by Michel Outremort, from a late First Generation world called Clodovie.”

“Did he really discover 666 planetary systems?”

“No, only about a dozen. The number came from some religious book revered by his ancestors in a country called France. Apparently he thought it was a place suitable only for an evil god.”

“Even so, why haven’t the Seeders claimed it?”

“To begin with, it’s two wormholes off the beaten track – the first wormhole leads to a completely barren system. The wormhole from there to Outremort 666 is directly on the opposite side of its sun, maximizing system transit time. And the planet is tidally locked in a close but eccentric orbit. Not the sort of place any Terrans would be thankful to be taken to.”

“Were they ever thankful for being abducted from their homeworld?”

“I suppose not. But I’m sure fetching up on Outremort’s planet would have made them feel a lot worse.”

“Anyway, it was discovered a millennium ago, so the Seeders aren’t interested.”

“And that’s exactly why we should be,” Tuva said.

“We’ll be free there, with nothing to fear, you mean. Because it’s a world nobody else would want. Only, I’m not sure / want it.”

“We’ll have to see it first-hand, of course. It’ll be good to get into space again.”

“That should be *my* line,” she mock-complained.

“One of the things I love about you.”

She kicked him – gently – and they spent the rest of that evening experiencing all the other things they loved about each other.

\* \* \*

When the *Asman* returned a few days later, Tuva was the first to greet Captain Asenion and the crew – and to brief them about the latest developments that he hadn’t wanted to trust to the com.

Asenion called a general meeting aboard ship, away from prying eyes and ears. It was Tuva’s show, really, but it was Prima who got it going.

“When I first met Tuva, I knew that we needed him,” she told her colleagues. “I was right. He could see things in a way we couldn’t. He can still see things... differently. He’s about to show you just *how* differently. And we’re all going to have to see things that differently if we’re going to survive as a people. He has found a world for us. Not a pretty world – yet. Not a comfortable world – yet. But it is a world where we can *live*, a world that we can make our own. Bear that in mind.”

Tuva didn’t expect enthusiasm or applause as he made his case for the reddish world circling the reddish companion of Outremort 666. He backed into his argument by leading with the kind of expertise he brought to the subject as a naturalist.

“Now this creature you see here is the product of an evolution radically different from any you’re likely to see anywhere in the universe,” he said of the spidery big-eyed animal. “Outrement’s people were convinced that the red-brown dwarf was captured by the primary star within the last several million years. For billions of years before that, the dwarf wandered alone. Animal life that evolved under its heat could see only by its light,

and that meant seeing deep into the infrared – for that they needed the large lenses you see here. But when their little sun was captured by Outremort 666, the sky above them was suddenly too bright – way too bright. That’s why the survivors, like this creature, evolved *tinted* lenses – sort of like living sunglasses.”

He had their attention now.

“Well, those little creatures with the big eyes had to adjust to change, and so will we. I won’t pretend that this world is some exotic paradise. I won’t pretend that it isn’t going to take years – decades – of hard work to make it a fit place to live as opposed to another refugee camp. We’ll have to bring there, not only an entire people, but an entire ecology – as much of Belside as we possibly can. We’ll have to clear land and build homes and plant crops and raise livestock.

“It can’t be done all at once – to give one example, we’ll have to keep livestock in cryostasis until there’s enough for it to graze on. We’ll have to live on stores ourselves, until we produce enough for a sustainable food cycle. And even as we live a more primitive life than we’re used to, we’ll have to maintain the technology to produce the QEDs that our livelihoods – and eventually our wealth – will depend on. It will be a long and complicated struggle, but it is one we can and must win.”

Tuva paused to review the terrible events that had overtaken their homeworld before making his concluding plea.

“We may be running out of time. We don’t know what’s going on back on Belside, and we don’t have any way of finding out. Not that I don’t trust Layosh; he’s a good man, and I’m sure he’s doing the very best he can. But he might run up against some unexpected problem – bad weather, an outbreak of disease, whatever. As for the other

refugee camps, I have no idea. But morale is critical to survival; we have to bring them word, we have to bring them *hope*.”

It was enough to carry the day, if only because nobody could think of a better alternative. Tuva held Prima’s hand, and squeezed it lightly, Nothing more than that. But it meant worlds.

Captain Asenion informed Resorjem of the crew’s decision, and then everyone set to work. There was a lot of preparation to do for the coming journey – and to keep things going here at the shipyard. Fareh was put in charge of the QED farm – that’s what they calling it now – and Prima gave her the drill on that, and on overseeing the construction of the colony ship.

There was plenty to keep them all busy, but there were also distractions: rumors out of Thera about Kozut’s people pressuring the Velorians to move in on the Belstar system, clear out the Aureans – if there were any – and “restore normalcy.”

*As if!*

“All Kozut can do now was screw things up,” Tuva told Asenion. “But, given what the Velorians know now, I figure they’ll be keeping him on a pretty tight leash. He may not know it, but the days of his so-called government-in-exile are numbered.”

“It’s already happening,” the captain said. “You should see my mailbox here.”

Job applications were coming in from former crewmen of the Theran pleasure cruisers, who were out of work and had heard about the new ships – the colony project couldn’t be kept secret, despite the lack of any official announcement about it.

“I’ll review their qualifications, interview as many as I can,” he said. “I’m going to try to create shadow crews for the colony ships. We won’t need them right now, but we’ll

have them ready when the ships come online. We can put them on stipends until then, draft training programs for QED flight – that'll be new to them. Another thing Fareh can handle while we're gone.”

It took several more weeks to get everything organized. And just when they had their plans all in place, the *Capitalist Roader* returned. But not to interfere, to *help*.

## XVII

“10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, *mark*.”

Normal space vanished before Prima's eyes as she completed the countdown from the astrogator's chair. Tuva was on the bridge with the Up Crew, but staying out of the way as the *Asman* made its final transit into the Outremort 666 system.

“Well, we made it,” Captain Asenion announced as they popped back into normal space. It was more a matter of relief than of triumph, after the long journey through the near-emptiness of the Outremort 11 system. There had been little to do, or say, on that journey. Long silences had become a habit, and even now...

Was her mind racing, or had there actually been no response to the captain for several minutes? However long it was, Pilot Yelchin broke that silence.

“Sir and Captain, shall we set course for Outremort 666-6-1?”

“Indeed, Sir and Pilot. Dame and Astrogator, plot our approach.”

It was as if a dam had broken. As Prima crunched her numbers and programmed a course, as Engineer Damirzadeh engaged the QED, the rest of the people on the bridge began chattering.

Some of the Down Crew came up from below, and got a few words in.

“Special dinner, end of shift,” promised Foodservice Engineer Paltons, “Smeerp casserole.”

She’d told them all about that sort of thing, so it got a lot of laughs, except from Tuva, who looked cross.

“Well, something *just as good*,” Karol amended himself. That actually brought a smile to Tuva’s face.

“These smeerps,” wondered Assistant Engineer Chosser. “Will we be bringing a breeding pair of them here?”

“Self-generated planetary engineering,” quipped Yelchin. “Is that what you have in mind?”

“Assuming they can thrive on the local vegetation,” Tuva remarked, as if he took the idea seriously. Perhaps he did, because his next words were: “Of course, we should also preserve the native life – have a natural park somewhere.”

“That’s assuming there’ll *be* a settlement,” Asenion cautioned. “That’s what we’re here to determine.”

*Don’t let this all go for nothing*, Prima almost prayed to herself. She took another glance at Tuva. Their eyes met. They seemed to be sharing a thought.

“I expect we’ll be hearing any minute from Zuminga,” said Comm Officer Aroyan. “Maybe he’ll actually have something to say this time.”

But when the call came, it was from Katanem – the trade captain as opposed to the travel captain.

“We have you in our sights,” he said. “We remind you that as authorized by the Factor General, we are prepared to supply all the necessaries for an initial settlement.”

Travel Captain Zuminga had informed them of that at the outset. It was a risky and startlingly generous offer on the part of the Scalantrans, given that they couldn't be sure the Belsidea would find the new world acceptable. But then, the *Capitalist Roader* had saved months of travel with its QED module, so perhaps Katanem considered a fair trade.

"We have also included the first installation for producing drive modules here, on the assumption that suitable raw materials will be available," the trade captain added. "We look forward to doing business with you on a regular basis, and will be pleased to add your new world to our trade circuit."

*So that's what it's all about,* Prima thought. *We should have known all along.*

"They're taking an awful lot for granted," Captain Asenion said after Katanem signed off. "Do they know something we don't?"

"They must have worked this all out with the Factor General," Tuva said. "They must have figured out what we know. We don't have a viable alternative. Not a practical one, anyway."

That brought a renewed hush to the bridge, not unlike what had prevailed for most of the long and boring journey through the Outremort 11 system – a real number as opposed to the fanciful one the explorer from Clodovie had concocted for the system beyond – had nothing whatever to recommend it.

Its sun was attended only by a scattering of asteroids and a cometary belt. There was nothing in the least unusual about either, nothing to attract miners when the same metals and organics were plentiful elsewhere, nothing to justify manufacturing for export when there were thousands of other factories along the major space lanes.

Michel Outremort must have thought his luck would change at the next transit; he certainly must have longed for that, given that it had to have taken him a ship's year to cross the gulf. At least he hadn't had to waste time evaluating Outremort 11 – there was nothing *to* evaluate. But Outremort 666 had surely been a disappointment to end all disappointments – and it was a dead end; nowhere to go beyond it.

Why the Old Galactics had ever come here, why they had ever created these two wormholes, would forever be a mystery. Outremort's discovery might have attracted some interest among humans, if their interstellar travel had been more common – and if they had not been preoccupied with other things. It was not the sort of place that would ordinarily have gotten the attention of the Scalantrans.

But it had gotten their attention now.

*Because of us*, thought Prima.

Outremort 666 itself was bright white star, its radiation too powerful to allow for life on planets in its zone of habitability – had it had any in that zone. But apart from two closely-orbiting gas giants – nearly always a tip-off that a stellar system wouldn't have any worthwhile planets – there were only small and airless rocky worlds and worldlets further out.

And then there were Outremort 666-6, and Outremort 666-6-1.

Prima brought their destination on screen: first the dwarf star, a dim red smudge; then its only satellite – technically not a planet at all, although it was comparable to Belside and Thera in size and mass.

*Our new home?*

\* \* \*

They already knew the basics from the records of the long-dead Outremort: that the planet kept one face towards the dwarf star, but that its eccentric orbit caused it to sway back and forth enough for a quarter of its surface to alternately face towards or away from its primary.

That was enough to maintain circulation back and forth in the atmosphere and to prevent all the water and most of the air from accumulating and freezing on farside. It was enough to allow for life and the evolution of life, a slow process compared to that on typical Seeded worlds due to the low level of radiation and relatively tranquil geology.

The flora were mostly analogues of lichens, mosses and ferns. The fauna were mainly the equivalents of arthropods, although there were a few more advanced forms like the bigeyes – warm-blooded but otherwise more reptilian than mammalian. Yet even these were herbivores, plant life being so abundant that carnivores had never evolved,

*A peaceable kingdom, Tuva thought. A perfect refuge. Or are we only making a virtue of necessity?*

From orbit, the world looked pinkish, even in the light of the primary star, from the natural color of the vegetation on land and even the rafts of algae in the sea. Evolution here had found an alternative to chlorophyll that served the same purpose. It produced enough oxygen to serve human purposes.

“Any recommendations for a landing site?” Captain Asenion asked.

Nobody else seemed to have any idea. There was a sameness to the planet, no matter where you looked.

“Somewhere near the shore, Sir and Captain,” Tuva volunteered. “We ought to get a look at both forms of life.”

*As good a place as any for a settlement, he thought. If it comes to that.*

Eriq nodded. "Anyone else?"

"I second Tuva's recommendation," Prima said. She glanced in his direction, then cast her eyes about the rest of the crew.

"Why not?" Fareh said. Others mumbled their assent, or just shrugged.

Captain Asenion himself made the final choice, picking a spot near the equator where a small river bordered by alien vegetation flowed lazily towards the sea.



"Sir and Comm Officer, please inform the Scalantrans of our decision," he told Danil Aroyan.

And that was the way it was. History happens like that.

\* \* \*

*What do you call a smell you've never smelled before?*

That was Prima's first thought as she stepped off the ship.

Words failed her, and yet somehow the world didn't.

The landscape was monotonous, the stretches of redfern broken only by redfern trees. The sea, a brisk walk distant, seemed almost like a huge bog, undulating only slightly in the breeze. Nothing like Belside, nothing like any world she had visited, or that she had even imagined.

It was preternaturally quiet. There were a few of those bigeyes in the distance, apparently munching on the vegetation, but not making a sound. Other, smaller animals could occasionally be seen, scuttling in and out of sight. There were insect-like flying creatures that would glide across the redferns, beat their wings enough to rise above them, then glide again – seeking their favorite nourishment, she supposed.

It was bleak, and yet somehow beautiful. Above them, the small point of light that was the distant white star illuminated the huge red crescent of the dwarf – its own glow was almost invisible, just a hint of pinkness in the sky.

She and Tuva went off by themselves for a walk through the redferns to the small river. There were odd-looking creatures in it. Not exactly fish. They seemed to be feeding on the river algae, keeping the (presumably) fresh water clear, unlike the sea.

“Something's gone wrong with the sea,” Tuva theorized. “Maybe eutrophication. Can we do anything about it? Should we?”

“You're talking as if it's a foregone conclusion we'll be staying here.”

“I’m talking as a naturalist.”

“This planet needs some work,” Prima objected.

“It’s beautiful,” Tuva said as he stood at her side, his arm around her waist.

She loved him, but refused to be upstaged.

“We’ll make it beautiful,” she said.

“Does that mean?”

“It does.”

She followed that with a deep kiss, a promise of what was to come.

“But we have to convince the others,” she added when they came up for air.

\* \* \*

There was a sound in the sky. The *Capitalist Roader* was coming in for a landing.

Tuva and Prima joined the rest of the Belsidea in striding over to welcome the Scalantrans.

Katenem was the first off the ramp. Then came Zuminga.

“We’re open for business,” the trade captain said.

“We’re open to alliance,” the travel captain said.

The *Asman’s* captain was dumbstruck.

Then came a Scalantran driver with a lift truck, unloading... something.

It turned out to be food supplies. Human food. Tuva recognized the brand names on the cartons – Belsidea brands, from dealers serving the expatriate community on Thera, the same sort of stuff they’d been used to on at the Yoparos shipyard.

“A token of our interest in your grand enterprise,” Kantanem said.

“We are thankful,” Asenion managed to say. The other crewmen just gawked.

But that was just the beginning: there were other loads to come, everything from pre-fab sections for housing to portable toilets. Portable generators, too, electric wiring and lights, basic furniture (assembly required), all the comforts of home – except that they no longer existed at home.

“They’re *really* taking an awful lot for granted,” Captain Asenion said.

“They must think they’re making an offer we can’t refuse, Eriq,” Tuva responded. “But that’s the thing. I don’t want to refuse it. Neither does Prima.”

“You realize that this isn’t your decision,” the captain reminded him.

“We’ve made a decision of our own,” Prima said. “We want you to marry us. Here and now.”

\* \* \*

It was an ancient but rare custom that a ship’s captain could perform marriage ceremonies. But never had the circumstances been as rare as this, the first ceremony ever to be held on a world where humans had never lived, or meant to live, until now.

Nor was it customary that the assembled witnesses should include Scalantrans as well as humans – more of the former than of the latter, for the *Capitalist Roder* was home to a larger working crew, with its mate groups and their cohorts of younglings. The children were a strange sight indeed, for they were rarely seen by others.

“No doubt we seem equally strange to them,” Fareh remarked as she gazed at little red offspring of the big red traders. The little red offspring gazed back. *Surely they must be curious, even wondrous*, Tuva thought. But he didn’t have any way of reading their faces. Few if any humans did. But one thing he was sure of:

“I expect we’ll be dealing with them one day,” he told Prima. “Or their children. Two next generations.”

“We’ll have to get started on that. Or should we wait until...”

“Sssh! Not yet.”

Captain Asenion was signaling the crowd for attention.

“We are gathered here to celebrate the union of Tuva Armaan and Prima Kelsor,” he began. “Having consecrated themselves to each other, they now call on us to bear witness to the conformation of that consecration.”

He paused for a moment.

“Before this company, a company the likes of which has never gathered for such an occasion, we remind ourselves of the ideals of individuality and community, and how they are reconciled in our chosen loyalties and relationships – including that closest and most intimate loyalty and relationship of marriage. Tuva and Prima, I ask you now: are you prepared for this commitment?”

“We are,” they said as one.

“Do you come to each other knowingly and lovingly, without reservation?”

“We do.”

“Prima, what do you bring to this man?”

“My body, My heart. My soul.

“Tuva, what do you bring to this woman?”

“My body. My heart. My soul.”

“Inasmuch as you have chosen to be joined, body to body, heart to heart, soul to soul, and by the customary authority of my office, I recognize and honor your union and

commend it to be recognized and honored by all and sundry, here and wherever your lives may take you.”

There was applause from all the assembled humans, and some sort of rumbling from the Scalantrans that they took to be of the same purport.

“Have you words for us?” the captain asked after the uproar had subsided.

“As we have chosen each other, we would have you choose this world to share with us and all Belsidea,” Tuva said.

“But not *only* Belsidea,” Prima added. “There were those who chose our former world, my own family among them, for its freedom of thought, its love of learning and discovery and its spirit of enterprise, who wanted to live worthwhile lives and pursue worthwhile work. Let their like, too, be made welcome here.”

*I've been blindsided*, Asenion thought, his face red with embarrassment. Yet a moment later, his embarrassment faded. *I should have known this was coming; perhaps I did, on some deep level.*

“This man and this woman have spoken truly,” he declared, before anyone could gainsay them. “They have shown their boldness and initiative in their time together with us, and we should show the same boldness and initiative. We have lost a world, but we have gained a world – a world we can make our own, where we can be ourselves.”

The entire crew approved by acclamation, after which they sat down to a banquet provided by the Scalantrans, who also supplied the tables and chairs. There was much laughter, and much banter – some of it suggestive.

After all had had their fill of food and banter, Tuva offered a toast:

“Be happy for us. Be happy for yourselves. Life is good. The universe is good, can you but see it.”

Prima followed:

“To our dreams, and to our love, and to the things we fashion from them.”

They drank to each other, and to their new home. But that gave Captain Asenion occasion to raise a previously unasked question.

“What are we to *call* our new home?”

He was blindsided again by Tuva’s quick response.

“Kelsor 7,” he said.

“Kelsor *seven*?”

“Jonas was seventh of his line on Belside, remember?” Prima explained. “Let our new world be a fitting memorial to him... Anyway, if you count the dwarf as the sixth major object orbiting Kelsor...”

The naming wasn’t exactly proper procedure. But it was a *fait accompli*.

\* \* \*

It was late afternoon on Kelsor 7, one of the two kinds of afternoons – this one coming when Kelsor was about to be eclipsed by Kelsor 6, as opposed to the kind when Kelsor was about to slip below the horizon of Kelsor 7 itself.

Very complicated. Their brave new world was going to have one hell of a brave new calendar. Perhaps they would work on that. Or perhaps they would leave it for the other emigrants, when the first colony ship arrived.

*We should leave **something** to their initiative,* Prima thought.

She was growing yet another QED module – the Scalantrans had provided the wherewithal for that, along with the simple yet comfortable pre-fab home that Tuva had assembled. Just now he was at work in the garden, tending the first crop of Belsidea fruits and vegetables.

Work done for the day, they lay together in the comfort of the redferns, content to feel their closeness, content to watch the sky show unfolding above them.

As distant Kelsor slipped behind Kelsor 6, the limb of that great dim sphere was outlined in bright crimson like a crescent moon. Afterwards, the only glow came from the dwarf itself, soft and warm, like an invitation to lovers.

Prima and Tuva answered that invitation.