

# Empress of the Dawn

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## Book Two: Triumphs and Trials

### Part One: Jayar

#### 1. Death and Life

In death as in life, Feodor had been seated on a throne. He would even be buried in a sitting position, according to the custom of the Romaic emperors on distant Earth, although the patriarch of Andros had never claimed the imperial title.

Had it not been for the advanced technology of embalming acquired from the Scalantrans, his wish that he sit in state for the traditional 40 days of mourning could never have been honored. At that, some of his advisors had considered his last request grotesque. But they had honored it, and Feodor's people honored him.

Kalla was among them at this time, in the seventh year of the 991<sup>st</sup> Cycle – 1209 by Terran count. She no longer thought of herself as a foreigner. Her heart was like to break, for she had loved him to the end, and knew that he had never stopped loving her, even when he could no longer make love to her. It was painful for her to sit beside him now, day after day, but she did it for his sake and for the sake of his people.

They came by the thousands to the Petrovousa, the World Palace, which had been completed shortly before his death, making their way through the ornate doors, up the aisle of marble that was flanked by the seats prepared for members of the Megalos Synodus, the Great Synod, who had yet to gather here. It was mid-summer, and the weather had been fair. Bright light streamed through the stained glass windows.

High and low the people came. There was no order of precedence here, only the order of arrival. They came from the inner provinces and the Northern Reach, and even from the isles of the Gregoras clan. Municipal officials and their staffs in formal attire, merchants and magnates in their finest silk or shinefur, farmers in their militia uniforms and craftsmen in ordinary work clothes. Some wept openly, others wore sad faces. A few crossed themselves as they passed, although the church was no longer official. All stepped at a deliberate pace, not wishing to delay those behind them.

Kalla was seated to the right of the throne, a station intended for the patriarchal consort – but Feodor had never married again after his divorce from Helena. His only son Jayar was seated to the left – that is, at the right hand of the patriarch himself. Flanking them in temporary seats were the late patriarch's ministers, regional catapans and provincial governors and top military commanders, suitably dressed according to their station and Romaic tradition. Most wore expressions of sorrow – and concern for the future.

The future was Jayar; so Feodor himself had proclaimed at the gates of Ethrata after his final triumph over the usurper Festus. Kalla couldn't see Jayar now, but the last time she had, he had looked impatient. He had been impatient for some years, seeking a greater role in his father's government – and a place in Kalla's bed.

Feodor had tried and failed to persuade his son to spend more time at studies and among the people in preparation for his reign. For her part, Kalla had held to a strict interpretation of her indenture, namely that she was sworn to Feodor and Feodor only so long as he lived. It hadn't helped with Jayar that she was Deacon of the Academy of Feodoropolis – a center of learning like nothing that had ever been seen before.

What had passed for higher education under Patriarch Basil had centered on the Suda, an encyclopedia of Romaic historical and literary works that had themselves not been brought from Earth, and the study of rhetoric, philosophy and law with the aim of producing competent, learned personnel to staff the bureaucracies of state and church. But Feodor had never been content with that, seeking practical knowledge from other worlds, and Kalla had become his ally.

Creating the Academy had been one of their priorities, and for called for major advances in architecture, engineering and metallurgy, such as production of uruku steel – known to the Romaic Empire on Earth as Damascus steel, but actually produced in Bharat, from which its manufacturing secret had been brought to Indra, and from there to Andros. But that was only the beginning; a whole new generation of Androssians had to be trained in the use of new technologies, and the new educational institution had also fostered studies in other practical sciences that could improve the lives of ordinary people.

It had been while presiding at a seminar on agronomy, the sort of subject that had been scanted in Basil's time, that word had reached her of Feodor's death. He had been feeling weak for months, and sensed that the end was near. While he welcomed Kalla's company for conversation after work – he was still capable of sharing ideas – he

didn't want her standing vigil as Jayar did, hovering at his bedside as if in anticipation, having little to say and offering little comfort.

The subject had been himmas, a legume that had been known to the Romaioi on Earth, and used in a variety of dishes there, but had never been brought to Andros by the Seeders.

From her reading of imported scientific texts, Kalla had recommended that they could be a welcome addition to the diet here: they could be grown easily, and were high in fiber, protein, carbohydrates, gloandrok (as Element 15 was called on Velor) for development of bones and teeth, and certain acidic nutrients essential to the synthesis and repair of human lifecyphers.

It had always given Kalla pleasure to introduce new things of life to her adopted planet. Boomers and spitters had been necessary to the salvation of Andros during her first months here, and were still important to mining, industry, construction, hunting and police work. There were more fearsome weapons, she knew, but they weren't needed here yet, and she hoped they never would be. The Scalantrans didn't trade in weapons of mass destruction, but the means to produce them could easily be learned – just as in the case of boomers and spitters...

But there had been other uses for materials like uruku steel, during and after the building the new capital. There were blades for plows and windmills, structural supports for grain storage facilities, boilers and working parts for steam vehicles....

She hadn't been thinking of that during the seminar. She had been explaining recipes for himmas, and preparing to invite the agronomy field agents to sample some that she had prepared, when the message came.

Kalla made hurried excuses, but she could tell that the field agents were almost as saddened as she was; they understood. She spotted them among the first mourners when Feodor's body had been prepared and placed, and the long wake had begun. As the wake came to an end, she was prepared to face what was coming, and it wasn't long in coming.

Jayar claimed his right, and took it. He proved to be... adequate. But then almost any man could be adequate, given how easy it was to please a Velorian woman. Only, she knew how important it was to convince him that he was more than adequate; that he was as great a lover as Feodor in his prime. Thank Skietra, she didn't have to fake orgasms, but she did have to fake the look on her face afterwards. Jayar couldn't; she could see his smug look of self-satisfaction, nothing more...

Jayar and his wife Vigilia had a 15-year old son, Methodios, and two daughters, Helena and Theodora. Daughters didn't count in the line of succession, of course, so Methodios would rule one day. Kalla had seen Jayar's family only at a distance; he had kept them apart even from Feodor, save for the most formal occasions. Did he love them any more than he loved Kalla?

On their first night together, Jayar made it clear that they were off limits, that she would never be part of his inner circle. That hadn't surprised her.

"But, of course, you will work with me on matters of planetary development, just as you did with my father," he told her. That hadn't surprised her, either.

It was obvious, even if he didn't come out and say it, that this was going to be a trade-off: how much he indulged her would depend on how successfully she indulged

him. It came out of the other half of his parentage, and his upbringing, and how that was going to be played out had been settled 20 galactic years ago...

## 2. Woman in Flames

It was a strange armada that Kalla had led to the very seat of the Gregoras clan. There were dozens of boats with soldiers on deck and others at the oars, but no components of catapults or other heavy weapons aboard.

She sailed a small skiff, powered only by the wind, and with only herself at the helm. As she made her way through the broad bay to the seaward wall of the enemy citadel, the triremes behind her held back, their oars motionless.

It was dawn, and the watch must have alerted the leaders of the Gregoras clan to her approach. She could see their soldiers lined up atop the rampart – mostly archers and swordsmen, but also some engineers manning catapults. Pavel himself, cousin to Festus, would surely be commanding them.

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“Shock and awe,” Feodor had drilled her one night. “They will not have heard of you, save as my concubine. They will not have heard back from their own fleet. They will expect their commanders to return in triumph. You must first shock them, then awe them, and finally make plain to them the new state of affairs.”

Kalla hadn't know anything about sailing, but Feodor explained that she would be taking lessons after dispatching the token attack force of triremes from Romania the following morning.

“It will take them a twelveday to reach Mycenae,” the Patriarch told her. “Within that time, you should be able to master the basics of controlling the sail and using the tiller. You will fly the skiff to join the fleet the afternoon before the demonstration. You will set your course at three sunwidths to the right of the setting sun. Fly high enough, and you can’t miss your destination.”

Feodor’s formality showed how seriously he took the coming expedition. But the look on his face showed the pride he took in Kalla, in all that she had accomplished in the short time she had been on his world.

“And speaking of destinations...” he added. He cast his robe aside, revealing his lust for her; she had already donned her gold, anticipating as much. “Come to me,” he said, tapping the bed. “Come *with* me.”

Feodor lay back, the better to drink in her beauty with his eyes, and she staked herself on him, grinding against him slowly at first and then quickening the pace. They took each other in the full light of his chamber, holding nothing back, finding joy not only in the rhythms and ultimate release of their passion but in the looks they exchanged – the looks of love. His love was even deeper than his penetration, hers even deeper than her womanhood. They savored the afterglow for a time, and then...

“There are things we need to accomplish before you set out, even before your sailing lessons,” Feodor said. “And you’ll have to leave your necklace behind when you fly to Mycenae. But I’ll keep it safe for you. As safe as you have kept me.”

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*Pavel must be watching*, Kalla thought, as she brought the skiff about at the head of the bay and dropped anchor. *But what does he think he’s watching?*

The triremes had shown their colors before the capital Mycenae at dawn; the Lord there would know that they came from Romania and were loyal to Feodor. But on one hand, they might think that this was a desperate counterattack; on the other, a feint to mask a more serious assault elsewhere on the coast.

“Sow confusion, even before the shock,” the Patriarch had told her. The warriors of Gregoras would be confused by the small number of boats and armaments in the flotilla. But their eyes would be focused on her, for it was against all law or custom for an embassy to consist of a single person on a fishing boat.

Kalla was even dressed as a fisherman, which must be sowing further confusion among the warriors and their Lord. Although they stood far above her on the rampart, she could almost feel the stare of their eyes.

Now for the moment of truth. She raised her voice to its loudest. It would be heard by all, and heard as a woman's.

“Your rightful Patriarch has dispatched me to accept your surrender,” she yelled at them. “Your Lord is no more. His reign is ended.”

There was a sudden commotion on the rampart. Then the Lord Heir himself – it *must* be him – stepped forward. He was not unlike Feodor: solidly built and with a thick beard. Kalla saw that he wore not only ceremonial robes but a crown – the sort of thing Feodor considered an affectation save on formal court occasions. It was likewise an affectation that his capital was named for the oldest city in ancient Hellas on Earth.

“Where is your so-called Patriarch?” he shouted back. “Dead himself, no doubt; even he would not resort to sending a woman to do a man's job. You are the defeated, seeking to deceive us. Begone, you and your pathetic rabble, or feel my wrath.”

“Your rightful Patriarch is presently occupied with setting things right at home, after the damage inflicted on his people by your former Lord,” Kalla said. “It is *his* wrath that *you* shall feel, should you dare stand against him.”

“You have been given fair warning,” declared the Lord, who gestured to a man next to him – an alchemist, from his dress; that could mean only one thing: Romaic fire. The alchemist signaled to his assistant, who deployed the siphon and began pumping his foul mixture – a secret brought to this world by some previous alchemist of the Romaioi on Earth.

The noxious liquid ignited in the air, and the stream of fire arced toward her. But Kalla stood defiant as the Romaic fire engulfed her and set the skiff ablaze. She was blinded momentarily, and had to blink away the flaming liquid to survey the scene.

Lord Pavel and his retinue must wonder how it could be that she still stood, and it warmed her heart more than the fire to imagine their reaction as she slowly rose into the air and approached the rampart. Feodor had prepared her for this, instructing her to recite the story of Moses and the Burning Bush from the Holy Book of the Romaioi.

*And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed.*

*And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.*

*And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.*

“What can this be?” Pavel asked the alchemist.

“Lord, I know not,” he whimpered.

“Blasphemy!” shouted a priest. “This creature claims to speak in the words of God, but can only be an agent of Satan!”

He chanted something that was incomprehensible to Kalla, but which sounded like one of the church rituals in koine Greek, classical ancestor of the Romaic spoken a millennium later – all she make out were the name of Iesus and the words for demon and begone...

“Try again,” the priest directed the alchemist, ignoring Pavel.

The flames from the Romaic fire had mostly burned out, leaving her naked but for the soot, as the alchemist signaled for another shot. This time, she approached so close to the rampart that she could see Pavel and his men flinching from the heat. To spite the priest and pleasure herself, she rubbed the flaming liquid against her breasts and between her legs, making moaning sounds.

Pavel and the priest were speechless; both looked as if they'd shitted in their pants. Panicky archers, without waiting for orders, let loose against her; their shafts only glanced off her body. She could tell that not only the Lord's eyes, but indeed all the eyes of the Gregoras, were upon her – and that all would be able to hear her words, for they had been stricken into silence. She looked Pavel in the eyes.

"I could burn this place to ashes. I could smash it to rubble. I could kill all of you, swiftly and mercifully, or slowly and painfully. But I choose not to do so. There has been enough needless death and suffering on this world. I want no more of that. Your rightful Patriarch wants no more of it. He offers full amnesty to you and yours. You will all be

secure in your homes and estates. Look to your own welfare and that of your children and your children's children. Put aside your foolish pride; come with us now and help us build a better world together. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain."

She turned from Pavel to address the alchemist, the swordsmen, the archers and all others who remained armed on the rampart. The engineers hadn't tried anything, probably realizing that their weapons couldn't be trained on a target capable of motion like hers even if they'd be any more effective than fire or arrows.

"You may withdraw from this place now, and leave your weapons. You have no other choice. Your rightful Patriarch's men-at-arms will see to them, and to you, once they have landed. You would do well to merit his mercy."

Nobody seemed to know how to react. Nobody gave an order. They looked to their Lord for guidance, and received none. But one among them broke at last, and then the others began to follow, abandoning their weapons. Like thieves in the night, they snuck away.

Pavel was left all alone, as still as if he had been turned to stone, until he too quit the place. In the days and years to come, he was suffered to live, and even allowed certain autonomy. Kalla came to believe that had been a mistake, and that Feodor had made an even greater mistake in allowing his ex-wife Helena to share custody of Jayar. But Feodor had been a man of peace at heart.

She had never shared her misgivings with Feodor, let alone with anyone else. She was a Companion, after all, and she must respect her lord. In any case, she knew, nothing good could have come of trying to second-guess what was, after all, strictly a family decision.

### 3. Reaching Out



There were no palaces here in Boreapolis, no ramparts. It was just a small town, nestled against a hillside. Once it had been just a hunting camp, a base of operations – and sometimes recuperation – for those who dared the brightbears for their shinefur. Today, it was the capital of the Northern Reach.

Jayar's mounted escort ahead of his coach had sounded trumpets to announce his arrival, as if the people of the capital had not eyes to see. The coach itself, made from the hardest wood of native Sidero trees, trimmed in gold without and provided with plush seats within for the comfort of the patriarch and his family, was an extravagance, but hardly an onerous one given the income accruing to the government from exports of the planet's greatest luxury.

The townsmen were on their best behavior, cheering the advent of their patriarch as if he had been Feodor himself. As Jayar stepped from his coach, Ignatios Zarides, catapan of the Northern Reach, bowed to him obsequiously and kissed his ring, while filling the air between them with flattering words that Kalla could tell he took at face value.

But, rather than Jayar and his wife and daughters, or Ignatios, it was Methodios, now 17, the son and heir, who caught her eye. And that was because she could tell that the boy's own eyes were caught up by the sights around him. He was really *interested*. That boded well for the future.

She could have flown here ahead from Feodoropolis, or flown later after Jayar's retinue arrived; but he had insisted that she be at his beck and call during the journey. That hadn't boded well; it made her uncomfortable to travel with his wife and children – even if it was in a separate coach, well to the rear of those of the patriarchal family and sundry retainers.

It wasn't just Vigilia and Helena and Theodora; she was almost grateful that they tried to pretend she wasn't there. It was Methodios himself. He was old enough to know her role in Jayar's life, even if his father hadn't made it clear. And he was old enough to... look at her in the way young men look at women when they reach puberty, with lust and longing.

When she caught him looking at her that way, she gave him a stony look back, and then turned away. He seemed to have gotten the message after the first few stops along the Great Northern Road, and it eased her mind that he now appeared to have found other interests.

Kalla knew that she was here only because Jayar and his family were here, and they were here because of the florid and fulsome invitation Jayar had recently received from Ignatios.

“My Lord and Patriarch,” it had begun. “Our loyal subjects are eternally grateful for your beneficence, on which rests the prosperity that the shinefur trade brings us. We shall be pleased to honor you at a festival sponsored by the hunters and tanners who will show you the fruits of their labors on your behalf...”

Jayar had read it to her the day it was delivered. Well, actually that night, when he came to her bed. He was very pleased with himself, and showed it. Kalla was also very pleased with herself, inasmuch as it had been she who had actually drafted the invitation, dispatching it by a trusted messenger of her own, but she was careful *not* to show it.

She hadn't talked about the Northern Reach, because she knew he resented the people of that region for having taken Feodor's side against the pretender Festus more than 40 years ago. She never mentioned Festus, either. But she did talk about the trade in shinefur. The Scalantrans, when their ship visited, insisted on meeting with her, and Jayar understood enough about the importance of good relations with the interstellar traders to go along with that.

It had been a sad occasion for her on their last visit a year ago, the year after the ascent of Jayar. Trade Captain Jemuna, the successor to Jusalem, was old and weary, ready to retire. Jusalem, who held that office when she first met Feodor, had died of old age a decade ago. She would never see her first benefactor again; she was certain, too,

that she would never see Jemuna again. Their successors would be strangers to her, however well she might be known to them.

As usual on Jemuna's visits, Kalla asked after her fellow Companions. There was usually little to report. Unlike her, they had never have direct contact with the *Bountiful Voyager*. Kalla had received correspondence from some during her early years here: Jaleel was serving a nobleman on Fujiwakoku and Liessa was indentured to some sort of syndicate on Indra. They seemed to be enjoying their lives there. So was Marzha, a consort to the emperor of Siguo. But she had heard only once from Jerusha, who was serving an autocrat on Ulakinil, and not at all from Rilanna – the Scalantrans wouldn't talk about her. But the correspondence, such as it was, had tapered off long before the death of Feodor.

It came as a surprise, then, that Jemuna had a story to share about Marzha. It had to do with a new role she was playing on Siguo, a world that had been seeded from Zhonguo, a land far to the East of the Basileia ton Romaion from which Andros had been settled. Nobody from the Romaic realm had ever been there, but there had been trade through intermediaries that brought silk and other luxuries.

"It has to do with what they call *touzhimu*," Jemuna said now. "Raising funds for public works by selling cards of chance that entitle the winners to a reward. The reward, in this case, being Marzha herself."

"And the emperor permitted this?"

"Cao Shan, son of Cao Fang, who had purchased her indenture. He feared that taxing merchants and farmers to pay for a personal extravagance would cause a public outcry, and even lead some to question the legitimacy of his rule. Such had happened

before on Earth, where the rulers of Zhonguo, which means Middle Kingdom, had lost the Mandate of Heaven and their kingdom split into three warring states.”

“The Mandate of Heaven? Did the Galen—”

“Not until they carried out a harvest during one of the wars between the Three Kingdoms. The idea of the Mandate had originated several dynasties before the Han, who were believed to have lost it when oppressive taxes and other abuses touched off a peasant rebellion. It was believed that the gods would bless a just ruler, but withdraw their blessing from a tyrant.”

“And then the gods came to them!”

“They believed that they had been given a Mandate to begin again on their new world, which they named the Fourth Kingdom. Therefore they took care to recognize the rights and prerogatives of the four traditional classes – landlords, peasants, merchants and craftsmen. To ensure impartiality, the touzhimu system was introduced to award new lands as the population grew and spread, as well as to finance projects like roads and canals and, later, lightning power systems.”

“Did you know Marzha would be part of it?”

“Not really.”

“Did she?”

“Not until Cao Shan broached the idea.”

“I’d think the odds would be against anyone winning her.”

“Not really. Chance cards don’t cost that much, and there’s a limit on how often anyone can buy them. So she got to meet all kinds of men, and all kinds of women, too,

for that matter. True, they weren't all great lovers – but those who were she could invite back to her bed as often as she liked, as long as she also accommodated new winners.”

“No doubt that would raise some eyebrows here.”

Jemuna looked blankly at her, and Kalla realized she had to explain what “raised eyebrows” meant.

“Well, here's something that should raise your own eyebrows,” Jemuna said. “We had some trouble on Indra,” she said. “Counterfeit shinefur produced by a local syndicate. We threatened to put them under the Ban, but they didn't believe it – not until we actually raised ship, without holding a trade fair. You can well imagine how the government took it; the maharaja himself was on the farcaller, *pleading* with us.”

“So what happened?”

“We told him that, before we returned, his government would have to seize all the fake fur and burn it in front of the palace. Plus, his people would have to pay a bonus for above the usual rate for the same quantity of the real thing. What else could Maharaja Ramalingam do? It was a nice fire, but very smoky, Probably stank like hell, too, but the Indrans got the point. We won't be having any more trouble with them.”

The anecdote was amusing on more than one ground; “Ramalingam” happened to mean “Penis God” in the Indran language, but as Jemuna remarked, his image was now hardly god-like. Not that it would matter to Liessa, whose syndicate had to do with mining and the like rather than interstellar trade.

*Enough of that.* Andros' cut of the forced shinefur sale was impressive, and Kalla would make sure Jayar knew it. The trick was to impress him about shinefur and its importance to the world's trade, and therefore its wealth. He must have already known

about that, but she wanted him to think about it without dwelling on where the shinefur came from, dwelling on the past instead of the future.

Kalla had played a crucial role in the expansion of the shinefur trade, using the explosive powder developed for the war against the pretender Festus to cut through a road wide enough for wagons along the steep mountainside where only a narrow path had linked the habitat of the brightbears to the Romaian mainland. She herself had set the charges and ignited them, because it was faster that way, and spared ordinary men from harm. The spitters, likewise developed for the war, had virtually eliminated deaths and injuries among the hunters.

Jayar had doubtless known about all that, too, but she didn't mention it to him, even after the invitation from Ignatios duly arrived – she had asked him to let the timing be a surprise, even to her. Instead, she had talked about the natural beauty of the Reach and its picturesque capital.

Kalla's recollections were interrupted by the eager voice of Methodios.

"Can we go on a bear hunt, pateras?"

*Not a good idea*, Kalla thought. *No place for amateurs*. She was relieved when Jayar turned his son down, even if it was for the wrong reason.

"Commercial hunting is beneath our dignity. Remember your station."

Ignatios and the other locals within earshot pretended they hadn't heard that. So did Vigilia and the daughters. Hunting had been an imperial sport back on Earth, Kalla had heard, but *only* as a sport. Feodor hadn't favored it; hunting should be for food or – in the case of the brightbears – a business.

“Anyway, how can it be sporting any more with spitters?” he’d asked her once. “If I didn’t need their support in the Synod, I’d let you drop in on some of those ‘sporting’ types the next time they go after tame ekaphi, and have you get between them and their helpless prey. Too bad the pellets wouldn’t bounce back far enough to hit *them*.”

“That *would* be fun,” she’d admitted. “But trouble is the last thing I want to bring to you... to us and our work here.” She’d paused for a moment. “Anyway, you’ve seen it before. Cast your mind back, and imagine spitter pellets bouncing off these...”

She’d proffered her breasts; and was excited by his response, all the more when he ravished them and came on them, ate her out to make her come again and again, and finally buried his manhood deep within her and pounded her like a battering ram until he exploded and she too exploded...

It had never been that hot with Jayar, and she hadn’t been terribly interested in his other pleasures. She’d heard that he had revived the old Romaic hunting tradition, and even sanctioned the use of spitters, but hadn’t really paid any attention until now.

And now... it was another thing to know about Methodios.

Who, having quickly recovered from his disappointment at being denied a chance to go on a hunt, wanted to at least see one of the tanneries.

“Stinking places, by all accounts,” Jayar told his son, who looked abashed again. And again, the locals pretended not to have heard him, with Ignatios turning the subject to the festival he had arranged for the patriarch. There would be singing and dancing – some of it of Varangian rather than Romaic origin, for people of Varangian descent were more common in the Reach – and wine would flow freely.

Kalla, naturally, was kept to the fringe of the event. She knew her place. In any case, she'd seen it all before on her own visits, which often had to do with preservation of the natural habitat on which the shinefur trade depended. Brightbears being native to the planet, their meat was inedible for humans. They hadn't known why when they were first settled here, and they couldn't understand the Scalantrans' explanations about incompatible kinds of lifecyphers.

Kalla had made it her business to bring understanding of that – and many other things. There was an entire ecology to the habitat of the bears, and all the life forms that were part of that ecology had to be sustained in balance. Only by augmenting what the Scalantrans called the food chain could there be any increase in the bears' numbers – and human settlements had to be compact, with farmland close in and well fertilized, in order to assure that the Wild remained untouched by Earthly ecology.

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The wine had indeed flowed freely at the festival, and Jayar had consumed it in sufficient quantity to put him in a better mood... or what *seemed* a better mood. Having spurned the tanneries, he was eager to see live brightbears in their natural habitat.

*Skietra!* Kalla thought, when Ignatios told her about it.

But the patriarch had been calculating, even under the influence: he won over his son, who was all smiles, and looking forward to the event. Ignatios and the rest hadn't dared stand in his way, insisting only on a proper escort. Only, Jayar wanted his own escort, and he didn't want any men besides his own to go armed. That being standard procedure for state visits, the catapan was helpless to raise any objection.

Kalla learned this only the next morning, from Ignatios, Jayar having said nothing of it when he came to her bed. The catapan said he had hoped the patriarch would think better of it after sleeping on the matter; it was near dusk when the festival had wound down, too late to travel to the preserve. But came the dawn, Jayar hadn't changed his mind.

"He can't afford to look foolish or, worse, weak," Ignatios told her, trying in vain to hide the anxiety in his voice. "None of his people know anything about the habits of brightbears, and the few hunters allowed along won't even have their spitters. I suppose everything will go all right, but if it doesn't... I could be right in the middle of... I don't even want to think about it."

"I'll keep an eye on things," Kalla said, gesturing towards the sky. "Just in case."

"Just in case... and stay out of sight, if that's possible."

It was a good thing that Kalla could fly silently. She hung back, well to the rear of the patriarch's party, and high enough that anyone looking back might think she was a bird. She could see one of the brightbears in the distance, over a rise. Jayar's people wouldn't have spotted it yet, nor the hunters. Right now, she thought, Methodios would be looking about at the other native life forms he'd never seen before like beard bushes, sick trees, slizzards and metataurs.

None of the fauna other than brightbears were particularly dangerous, although some of the flora were toxic to Terran and native life alike. There was a fence along the border of the preserve nearest Boreapolis, but it wasn't really needed. The lack of food beyond their territory was now an ingrained deterrent to animals that might otherwise have strayed into human territory.

Jayar may have thought their aversion to trumpets was just as strong; more likely he was just too addicted to his own pomp, for he had his escort blow them as one of the metataurs, which had been munching peacefully on the broadgrass, approached. That seemed to startle the herbivore, which turned about and went galumphing up the rise – only to catch the attention of the brightbear, carnivore at the top of the food chain.

As the brightbear came into view from behind the rise for people on the ground, and attacked the metataur, the trumpets sounded again – Kalla couldn't tell whether that was intended as a warning to the rest of Jayar's party, or just as a display. But it had the wrong effect; except for the patriarch's honor guard and the hunters, people were milling about in confusion, and the brightbear – whether from the sound of the trumpets or the noise of the commotion – was distracted, and looked up from his prey...

Brightbears hadn't been known to attack humans without having been attacked first, but then virtually the only humans they had ever encountered had been hunters – of whom they had grown more wary after spitters came into use. Kalla didn't have any idea how they'd react to a crowd of people in colorful costumes instead of drab hunting gear, and she didn't want to find out.

But when the brightbear below turned towards that crowd and began advancing, she knew she couldn't wait to learn whether it was out of mere curiosity, or in search of prey. As she flew towards it, the beast picked up its pace. Jayar's escorts began firing, but they were ceremonial guards rather than seasoned soldiers; the few hits they made missed the brightbear's most vulnerable spots and only enraged it. The hunters were apparently appealing to them for the spitters; she could see them gesturing.

Jayar's retainers were turning tail, but the patriarch himself seemed rooted in his place, and next to him was Methodios. Couldn't they see what danger they were in? No time to ask, only for the task. The brightbear was charging now, and she met it head on. It outweighed her several times, and knocked her to the ground by sheer momentum. But as the creature tore at her with its claws, ripping her clothes to shreds, she brought her own power to bear, breaking its front legs with her bare hands. Howling in agony, it managed to roll off her, and lay there on its side, helpless.

Kalla got to her feet, and looked towards Jayar's party. The patriarch still seemed frozen in place, but with anger on his face. Methodios' expression was one of wonder, and she realized he must be looking right at her naked breasts – totally unharmed, like the rest of her body. She brought her arms in to cover herself, but couldn't help but see that Jayar's escort and retainers were also staring at her.

Ignatios appeared to be the only one in authority keeping his head about him. It was he who, apparently not being gainsaid by Jayar, persuaded the escorts to turn over the spitters to the hunters, and the hunters knew what they had to do: put the brightbear out of its misery. They did so quickly and efficiently, but their leader turned to Kalla.

"The catapan thinks it best that you retire from the scene," he said. "Under the... circumstances."

Kalla nodded to him and his men and, without a word, took to the air. It didn't feel like a moment of triumph.

\* \* \*

There were circumstances, and then there were further circumstances.

Kalla spent the rest of the day in her quarters, and she was the only occupant of her bed that evening. Her only visitor, the following morning, was Ignatios, who arrived dressed as a commoner and, he told her, by a devious route.

“Jayar was informed that I had taken ill,” he said. “Possibly contagious. He might have checked up on me, but he was... distracted.”

“Distracted how?”

“Vigilia. She’d cursed him and even struck him for endangering her son. And in the public square.”

“That must have been something to see, and hear,” Kalla said, and gave him a slight smile.

“Jayar was claiming that he’d had everything in hand, that you’d only interfered, and I wasn’t about to contradict him. Nor was anyone else. It was a delicate situation. But young Methodios doesn’t understand delicate situations. He simply told his mother what had actually happened.”

*“Ouch!”*

“And after that, he wasn’t talking to anyone here but me. I advised him to have you sent home forthwith. That was before I took sick. The diplomatic thing to do. It gives me leverage. I can still salvage this situation, establish good relations between the patriarch and the Northern Reach. That’s what we have to focus on.”

“Indeed.”

“And you’ll comply meekly when his messenger brings the bad news?”

“I’ll be as meek as a mouse.”

“But mice can’t fly.”

Kalla laughed weakly, if not meekly.

“And now I must fly... flee... whatever.”

Ignatios took his leave. Jayar’s messenger brought Kalla’s flying orders. She took off for Feodoropolis...

By the time Jayar made it back by land, he was calmer. He returned to her bed, but his performance was only barely adequate. He said nothing to her about what had happened at the preserve, nor had she expected him to.

Afterwards, when the patriarch had retired to his chamber, Kalla was thinking of Ignatios...

*Has all our work gone for nothing? she wondered. Can he really snatch victory from the jaws of defeat?*

## 4. A Visitation

This should have been her moment. One of her moments. But Kalla was happy to defer to Ignatios.

Jayar’s minister of education shared the stage with the patriarch himself. Kalla was content to occupy one of the front rows, and to know that she was the one who had arranged today’s surprise program.

It had actually begun eight years ago, during the last Scalantran trade fair, before Ignatios had been summoned to the capital to be elevated to his present office. It was then that she’d met Cherya, Sulva’s successor as the historian of the *Bountiful Voyager*, and shared her idea with her. Today their plans were coming to fruition.

“Your patriarch has wisely increased his support for the Academy,” Ignatios told the Assembly. “Thanks to him, you have an opportunity to pursue knowledge that will be of profit to yourselves and to Andros. But you know that your world is part of a greater universe. And today you are about to learn more from a representative of that universe.”

Students who had signed up for a series of seminars on history and culture at the Academy of Feodoropolis had been informed that the opening session was going to be a special occasion, but they didn’t yet know just *how* special. If any had noticed that it had been scheduled for one of the four days of the trade fair at the spaceport, none would have made any connection.

Cherya had been spirited aboard one of the old coaches, although she was a tight fit. With the blinds drawn, the vehicle wouldn’t attract attention; really important people now traveled in steam carriages, which were still beyond the means of ordinary Androssians. She had been taken to the back entrance of the assembly building of the Academy, and extracted by trusted members of the staff. She was now waiting in the wings.

Jayar had been informed well in advance. But it appealed to his pride to be in on a secret like this and, even if he didn’t deserve the credit, he would take it. It was just as well that he was seated on a throne brought for the occasion, Kalla thought, lest there be injury to his pride just the same.

When Cherya stepped out onto the stage, the few students from families involved in the trade fairs took her appearance in stride. But the rest struggled to keep their composure. To gasp or show their astonishment in any way would mark them forever as ignoramuses. Of course they had seen pictures of Scalantrans... But seeing one in the

flesh standing next to an Androssian was another story. Ignatios was a well-built man, tall and broad shouldered. But Cherya towered above him and compared to him was so thin as to look like a stick figure drawn by a child. And those huge eyes...

But when the Scalantran began to speak, even those who had seen pictures must have been taken aback by the deep voice with which she greeted the Patriarch according to the protocol outlined by Kalla.

"Sebastos," she said, bowing to him as obsequiously as possible for one of her kind, which wasn't as deeply as possible for one of humankind. Jayar seemed satisfied with her intent, if not her performance, so she turned to the assembly and greeted the students. She scanned the hall, but was careful not to let her eyes rest on Kalla.

"It is a great honor to be here today," she began. "Yours is the first world ever to invite one of us to such an occasion. We have been traders in goods ever since we encountered the human and other inhabited planets of this Galaxy, but to take part in a trade of knowledge may be of even greater ultimate value. We come from elsewhere, but we have been here for some 6,000 of your years. We have seen much and have learned much, and I hope to put that in a perspective. To begin at the beginning..."

Most of what she had to tell was ancient history to Kalla: the Old Galactics, the wormholes, the Galen and the Seeders. But much of it was new to the participants in the Galactic History seminar, although they knew the bare outlines. History of any kind as a subject of serious study had come only with Feodor, although sons of the leading families had been expected to study law, philosophy, geometry and other disciplines under private tutors.

Even Androssian history was largely a matter of folklore, with many commoners believing that the first people on their world had been spirited there by the shades of their ancestors. There was possibly a grain of truth in that, Olympians claiming to have been descendants of ancient Greeks taken by the Galen themselves and... changed. Like the inhabitants of a number of First Generation worlds, they had become surrogate Seeders for Second Generation worlds.

“I have explained as concisely as I can how your world and its history relates to the greater history of humanity, and touches on a history that goes beyond humanity,” Cherya concluded. “I’d be glad to take some questions.”

“Kuriyeh—“ one student began,

“Kuriyah,” she corrected him. “I am female.”

There were a few titters, which grew into general laughter. Few would afterwards admit that they had mistaken the Scalantran’s gender, or even thought it unseemly for a female to be addressing them – they were nearly all men.

Overcoming his embarrassment, once respectful silence had been restored, the student pursued his question about the Galen:

“Kuriyah Cherya, then. Who were they? What were they like?”

“No one knows,” she answered. “I have never seen one, and I know of no one who has. But they are said to be shapeshifters who can mimic human appearance and even share lifecyphers with humans. They were much diminished during a war with their ancient enemies, the Elders, but they still survive. They have withdrawn, however, from direct contact with other species. And yet they take a peculiar interest in experiments with humans.”

“Experiments?” another student asked.

“That is what Seeding is all about. They seem to be interested in what happens when particular cultures are abstracted from Earth and left to develop in isolation. But sometimes they instruct the Seeders to make certain exceptions, as with the addition of Varangians to the settler population here. Of course, there were already Varangians in the Romaic Empire at the time, but they might have been excluded.”

“Have there been more unusual cases?” asked a third student.

“One of the worlds on our trading circuit, Fujiwakoku, was peopled mainly by a race called the Wa who lived on a chain of islands off the eastern coast of a continent called Asia. But a minority were Khazars, who came from a country thousands of miles to the west, where the ruling class had embraced the religion of the people you call the Yebraioi, although they were in no way related to them.”

Although most of the people in the Assembly had heard of the Yebraioi, because they were familiar with the Bible, they knew little or nothing about them except from that source. Cherya had to backtrack with a bit of further explanation.

*That’s ironic,* Kalla thought. *A refresher course in human history from an alien.* But Cherya was soon back on course, speculating that the Galen must have thought the two peoples they chose to have Seeded on the same world had something in common, although she couldn’t imagine what that might be. From there, she went into the world’s cultural peculiarities.

“They have an emperor called the Invisible, because he is never seen by anyone besides his wife and children and the palace guard. On the few occasions that he holds audiences, he speaks from behind a screen. And he communicates with the rest of the

government only in writing. Oddly enough, that institution came from the Khazars, even though they have otherwise left little trace on the language, customs, art or literature – literature, incidentally, is produced primarily by women, although they are otherwise inferior in status. For some reason, these writers are called *murasakis*.”

As Cherya continued with her account, Kalla was pleased that the Scalntran didn't mention the Velorian connection to Fujiwakoku, for that was where her one-time shipmate Jaleel had been indentured to a nobleman named Hayama Minyomi, a cousin to the Invisible – who had elected not to make himself visible to a *gaijin*, even a potential Companion.

One of Hayama's maternal ancestors had been a Khazar, which explained his Yebraioi given name, a variation on Veniamin, although nobody there seemed to know why. What it didn't explain was his passion for medicine, which went beyond the basics taught by the Scalntrans. He had independently discovered immunization, and applied it to a dozen common diseases there. His son and grandson, who had inherited his Companion, continued his work, and established a network of hospitals.

But Jaleel had had trouble settling in, Kalla had heard early on through Jusalem. For one thing, there were the complex rules of female deportment. It was bad enough that she lacked the shiny black flowing hair that was the *Wa* norm, but formal dress included a complicated 12-layered robe called a *junihitoe*, and there were seemingly countless other formal costumes following a system of color combinations representing flowers, plants, and animals specific to a season or month. Worst of all, Jaleel was expected to be a *murasaki*. Over the decades, she and the Fujiwajin had both had to make some adjustments...

On stage, Cherya wrapped up her account of Fujiwakoku, and invited further questions. But the next man to rise to the occasion offered a compliment that misfired.

“You certainly have a vocation for teaching history. Does it run in your family?”

It was Methodios, now 48 and a physics professor at the Academy. Kalla had made a point of avoiding personal contact with him, lest that trouble her relations with Jayar. She had never discussed the matter with the Patriarch, of course, but word was that he had acquiesced in his son’s choice after the death of his mother. His question was off the mark, but Cherya took it in stride.

“Nothing can run in my family, because we don’t have families,” she explained. “We recruit new crew members from the youthworlds, where our children are educated after adolescence, and taken on by other ships. We do have mate groups on board for pleasure and procreation, but I don’t imagine that’s what you had in mind.”

There was an outbreak of scattered embarrassed laughter in the Assembly hall. Jayar, Kalla saw, didn’t appear pleased. But he recovered after a moment, because his was to be the final word at this session, before the break for a reception. There being no further questions, Ignatios nodded, and the Patriarch rose and took the podium.

“We have all profited, I believe, from this extraordinary presentation. I believe that our relationship with the Scalantrans can only bring us further profit. In pursuit of that end, Minister Ignatios and I arranged for publication of an illustrated book that offers a more complete account of the Galactic History that our honored guest presented today. Sufficient copies for all professors and students have been reproduced, and the trade captain of the *Bountiful Voyager* has made them available free of charge as a gesture of good will towards Andros.”

It was Kalla, of course, who had actually “arranged” for the book eight years ago, and it would be a sensation for its look as well as its content. While printing had been introduced to Andros’ during Feodor’s reign, it used flatbed presses and movable type, with hand-cut illustrations – if any. Cherya’s book was produced by a more advanced process, with illustrations *in color* that were actually recorded images, and printed on a substitute for paper that was both more attractive and far more durable.

Jayar took his bows at the reception, where Cherya’s lavish history was formally unveiled, but suffered an unintentional embarrassment there – having had handouts about it produced by the Patriarchal printing office that clearly suffered in comparison to the volume for which the Patriarch was taking credit. When this had sunk in on him, he decided to take something else: his leave.

That was a relief. It left Kalla free to mix, to offer advice and encouragement to the professors and the young scholars who held the future of Andros in their hands and hearts and minds. They knew who she was, of course, but they knew her better as the inspiration behind much if not most of what had been accomplished at the Academy in recent years. If they referred to her other role at all, they called her the High Consort.

“Kalla,” came a call from across the room, past the refreshment tables. It was Ignatios. But there was a problem; Methodios was with him. She nodded in dismissal, but he ignored the gesture and waved her over. She’d be making a scene if she failed to respond; yet she feared she would be making a scene if she did. So she decided to wing it.

“We’ve got to talk,” Ignatios said in a low voice when she reached his side. And then it was Methodios who spoke up.

“We’ll *have* to get to know each other one of these days,” he said. “I know why you’ve been avoiding me all these years, but the Academy is our own common ground. I’m not going to talk to my father about this, and neither is anyone else here.”

Kalla felt embarrassed, and showed it.

“It’s not about *that*,” he assured her. “At least, not for years yet. But I need you to know that I want to *work* with you, like my grandfather. I don’t know how it is on other Seeded worlds with the consorts, but I doubt that any of them has accomplished what you have here. Even when you haven’t had the degree of... official support... that you should.”

“I have to play a role for Jayar,” Kalla reminded him.

“We all have to play our roles for him, don’t we?” Ignatios interjected. “Well, I’m satisfied with mine. Banishing you from the Northern Reach saved the Northern Reach, and my talent for flattery got me here. Jayar isn’t a bad man, really, just extremely self-absorbed, and if you *only understand that*—“

“I *never* wanted to understand that,” Methodios interrupted. “It was too painful. The way he treated my mother... and when she died, he didn’t even mourn her – just ran out and found another woman. And now I’ve got a kid brother who thinks the world of him and will hardly give me the time of day. There are moments when I’d... like to get out of here. I even asked Cherya if I could travel with her, and she took it seriously – but she reminded me it would take eight years to get back. And that’s time Pateria and I really should spend producing a son.”

Kalla had never met Kyros, Jayar's son by his second wife Basilina – and didn't want to. She knew Methodios had five daughters, Eusebia, Candida, Flavia, Justina and Petronia, but had never met them – although she had seen them occasionally.

“Perhaps your own son, or his son, will get the chance to travel to other worlds. It could happen. It *can* happen. We might even build our own ships. And I might be there to see it.”

“I don't understand,” Ignatios broke in. “Your people live longer than ours, but not *that* much longer.”

“So I believed when I first traveled here, and for many years afterwards. And yet I haven't shown any signs of aging. I thought it must be the luck of the Maternity Engine programming back on Velor, but the last time Cherya was here I asked her about it, and she said it was the same with the other Companions who accompanied me. So I asked her to make inquiries at Velor, and yesterday she told me that the same phenomenon had been reported among the oldest Companions from other ships.”

“Do you have any idea why this should be?” Ignatios asked.

“It must be from living beyond our own planet and its gold core. We couldn't fly on Velor, and our other powers were augmented offworld.”

“Does that have something to do with the gold jewelry they say you wear when you and... you know?” ventured Methodios.

“Word gets around, doesn't it?”

“Even palace walls have ears. And I grew up in the palace, after all.”

“I was the one who figured out the need for gold on the *Bountiful Voyager*. We didn't know our own strength once we left the gold field. And there were things none of

us imagined until we got settled on our new worlds – like getting involved in combat, as some of us have. And some of the early Companions were careless in their original role, even under gold; there were a few unfortunate... accidents.”

“None fatal, I trust.”

“No actual deaths, but fatalities to a certain male function. Only a few cases, as I said, but enough to threaten the program had word gotten out – which the Scalantrans made sure didn’t, except to the High Council – which now has a training program for Companions. Safe sex and also combat, which they hadn’t thought of when our group was sent forth. I hope that I won’t be needed again for combat; I’ve managed to avoid it since... the unfortunate business of the brightbear.”

“It was fortunate for *me*. I could have been killed that day. But then, it was partly my fault. I was very impetuous back then. Nowadays, I try to be more... methodical.”

“You two seem to be getting along very well now,” Ignatios put in. “I have had the honor, and I withdraw.”

The Minister of Education headed for the refreshment area, well-stocked for this occasion with Androssian wines for which the Scalantrans had found export markets on its circuit, and with the most recent improved breeds of fruits and vegetables developed at the Academy’s experimental farm.

“I think he means that you can see him any time,” Methodios said. “It goes with his territory. Whereas we have to be more... discreet. *And* methodical. I have some ideas I want to discuss with you, long-range ideas.”

“Such as?”

“Flight. Not your kind, though. When I was studying physics myself, it occurred to me that if one could remove all the air from a metal sphere, it would be lighter than air. It would have to be a really big sphere, of course, or the weight of the metal itself would negate the effect.”

“Wouldn’t your sphere be crushed by the pressure of the air around it?”

“It would have to be a very strong metal. We don’t yet know all the possibilities. Perhaps your friends the Scalantrans would know.”

“I’ve heard of airships something like what you suggest, but they’re made out of fabric and filled with some gas that’s lighter than air. But I gather that, wherever they’ve been invented or re-invented, they’ve soon been replaced by heavier-than-air craft with wings.”

“Flapping wings? Powered by steam engines?”

“I’m not sure. But the same worlds have steam-powered ships. That shouldn’t be too hard to work on here. We should be doing more to increase use of steam power at mills and mines and factories, too – it shouldn’t be just for showy things like carriages.”

“We ought to ask Cherya’s advice on this.”

“Indeed,” Kalla agreed.

Cherya was at the wine table, trying as best she could to explain to Academy staff and students what people on Indra loved about Androssian varietals. That was doubly difficult, because she herself couldn’t appreciate wine, while it was something entirely new to the Indrans – who were accustomed only to alcoholic beverages based on wheat, barley and millet.

“They do not have the words,” Cherya said. “Perhaps in time they will contrive some, and these will be equivalent to those used here. But the market is incredible. It will be hard for your vineyards to keep up, and I’m afraid the export demand will drive up prices here until you can increase capacity.”

The Scalantran welcomed the chance to tear herself away from what was turning into a futile exercise, and excused herself to chat with Kalla and Methodios. Ignatios, who was sampling a salad of nutrient-rich fava poltos, spotted them and sidled on over.

“He may be ignorant in some matters,” Kalla said – a reference to the “family” thing – after introducing Methodios formally. “But he’s full of ideas. You’ll be dealing with him in any case one of these days. It can’t hurt if you get to know him now.”

Methodios began talking with her about the ideas he’d already shared with Kalla, and Cherya was impressed.

“You have a lot to learn,” she said. “But you think ahead, like Kalla. And unlike a certain personage I might mention... I believe I can trust you with some texts that bear on certain technologies – not only those you have asked about. The most important thing you have to learn is that all such advances must come in their proper time, nothing premature and nothing delayed. There is what you might call... an ecology of progress. Kalla understands it intuitively, but I suspect you may take a more theoretical approach. In any case, I believe that you are essential to each other, and it is indeed fortunate that you are destined... partners.”

Kalla and Methodios looked at each other. They didn’t know what to say.

But Ignatios, who had brought them together, said it for them.

“I think this is going to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

## 5. Life and Death

The attack came without warning, and if Kalla hadn't been with Methodios and Jayar, it would have succeeded. There was a mystery in that, but it was a mystery that would never be solved. Kalla had her suspicions, but she could never share them with the Patriarch.

They had all been at Jayar's country estate near Nesalonika, for a celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the battle that secured the rule of the Andros dynasty – hundredth in Terran years once used by the Church for all purposes and still used in reference to people's legal ages. But even if the Church calendar hadn't still been in use for historical records, Jayar would have decreed a centennial that would take place in his lifetime.

The Patriarch's entourage had just stepped outside for the walk down the mall to greet officials of the city and the surrounding theme when one of the ceremonial guards who lined their path on both sides suddenly broke from his fellows and drew a spitter. Kalla immediately placed her own body between Jayar and the would-be assailant. But a moment later she realized that he wasn't aiming at the Patriarch, but at... quicker than the human eye could see, she shielded Methodios as the guard fired.

It was what happened next that shocked everyone. It wasn't that a ricochet had wounded one of the other guards. It was that Kyros, Jayar's younger son, only 21 by Terran count, drew a spitter of his own and shot the assailant dead before he could be taken prisoner and questioned. It was a senseless thing to do; the spitters worn by the

guards were ceremonial single-shot models, a matter of court tradition, and the would-be assassin couldn't possibly have had a chance to reload.

"Thus dies a traitor!" Kyros exclaimed. "Let any who might threaten our Patriarch meet the same fate!"

In the chaos that followed, only Kalla seemed to realize that Jayar had not been the target. Jayar had assumed that the assailant simply hadn't been able to aim right, and Methodios himself didn't challenge that. Yet even Jayar was also baffled by Kyros' action.

"If there is some conspiracy against me, we'll never learn who was behind it," he said privately to Kalla and Methodios after the dust had settled and removal of the body had been seen to. "Sometimes Kyros has a tendency to act without thinking. I can only hope that he grows out of this."

Methodios only nodded. Left unspoken was the fact that Pateria had never borne him a son, which meant that Kyros would one day become Patriarch. It had troubled him for years that he had failed to produce an heir. Once they became friends, he had even asked Kalla for advice: should he put away his wife and try again with another, for the sake of the Patriarchate? He was still deeply in love with Pateria, he said; but perhaps love must be sacrificed to duty.

Kalla had refused to answer. Eight years later, at the next landing of the *Bountiful Voyager*, she had done some research in the ship's database. Most often, she learned, it was just a matter of luck; but there were instances in which men *couldn't* father sons because of something to do with their lifecyphers. There was no way to find out in the

case at hand, Andros lacking the technology for lifecypher testing, and no good could come of telling him that, so she had held her silence.

It was now ten years after that, and now it was Methodios who held his silence – about the attack, about Kyros. Kalla hadn't even raised the matter, but he must have read the look on her face.

“We cannot let what happened today stand in our way,” he said, when they had a moment alone together. “We must build what we can, build what can survive any trials that may lie ahead.”

Later that day, Kalla made her way alone to the Strymon River, to the dam she had helped build and its generating plant that had brought the power of lightning to the estate and to the city of Nesalonika. The power of the river had been transformed into another power that must have seemed like magic when it was first proposed; but future generations would take it for granted.

She alone on this world had witnessed the battle that Jayar was commemorating. To him and even to Methodios, it was only an event of the distant past. No trace was left of it on the battleground itself, which was now part of the city, with homes and shops where there had once been defensive works. Even the bridge across which Tzimisces' men had advanced, and their few survivors later fled, had been replaced by a broader span that carried the rebuilt Great Northern Road here from Feodoropolis and on to the Northern Reach.

But Kalla could still call to mind the sights and sounds of mass slaughter – and her own part in that slaughter. It was just as well, she reflected, that Jayar hadn't called attention to the fact that it was she who had turned the tide of battle by using her heat

vision to set off Feodor's boomers after a sudden rainstorm had doused their fuses – and then had to witness countless men dying horribly from the force of the explosions and the flying shards.

No evidence of that remained here. Feodor's own dead had been interred in the city cemetery a league northwards; Tzimisces himself and those who had died with him had been cast into the Strymon. And yet Nesalonika had survived. The Patriarchate had survived. Out of destruction, there had come an opportunity for creation. She had seen that only dimly, so many years ago, but she had seen it – it was out of her love for Feodor and what he represented that she had acted. It was out of love for his people that she was here today, hoping against hope that she and Methodios could yet build for a future that would endure – even if there were more trials to come.

\* \* \*

Lightning power, under a different name, was as fundamental to Velor as orgone power was to Velorians. Natural lightning had been rare on her homeworld, and she had never made the connection. She had been struck by lightning a number of times while flying on Andros, however, and it had felt *awesome* – but she had figured out after a while that her body somehow converted its energy to orgone: a useful thing to know if she were in need of extra power and there was a storm within reach.

Kalla had never known anything about lightning power's workings as a source of energy for Velorian civilization, except that it was generated by solar receptors – there were hardly any clouds on her homeworld. It was common on other Seeded worlds, but generally produced by burning what were called fossil fuels – which, if they existed on Andros, had not yet been found.

Methodios had read up on it from the Scalantrans' archive as a guest of Cherya at Kalla's behest, and even been allowed to print out the relevant files. He wished the *Bountiful Voyager* could supply the technology itself, for he could tell that reproducing it would be prohibitively expensive on his world, where the very concept of lightning power was hard to understand.

"Fath – Professor. If this lightning energy can flow through a copper string the way water flows through a riverbed, how can it flow in both directions?"

That was Eusebia, his own eldest daughter, at a seminar he had organized to communicate the theory and practice of lightning power to his brightest students – of whom she was one. He wasn't playing favorites; there were a few other women taking part.

"It's just the law," he told her and the other students. "But more important, it has been the experience on other worlds that two-way current works better than one-way. And that is why it must be the foundation of our project to bring lightning power to this planet."

Jayar had eventually sanctioned the project, not out of regard for his son, and certainly not out of regard of Kalla, but because Methodios had spun a vision of turning night into day by the power of this new force. For the palace to be lit within and without, to be seen from miles away even on the darkest of nights...

But the end was frustrated by the means: solar power and windmills, at least for Feodoropolis, were an iffy proposition on account of the weather. And burning wood to run generators would produce a smoky haze; far more pervasive than that from steam highwheelers or even steam-powered factories – which the Patriarch had decreed be

kept at least three leagues from the city... and downwind. Fermentation of grain to distill a cleaner-burning fuel was practical – but with a growing population to feed, diversion of essential crops on such a scale could not be countenanced.

Methodios had been reluctant at first to suggest using the river. After all, it was hundreds of leagues distant from Feodoropolis, and the Strymon theme hadn't even been incorporated into the Patriarchate until the reign of Feodor's grandfather Leo. But there wasn't any source of sufficient water power anywhere near the capital... The question was how to convince Jayar that lightning power be introduced at Nesalonika first. "You can think of a way," Kalla told him, and her trust was not misplaced.

\* \* \*

"As Ignatios once put it, my father is 'malleable,'" Methodios reported after his audience with Jayar. "Only appeal to his vanity, and our success is assured. I simply told him that his country estate outside Nesalonika, close by the Strymon, could be lit with lightning power, if we could only bring it from the river... and he couldn't resist. Cost no object, he told me, and of course that includes the dam and the generating plant and the strings and the lamps."

The engineers and architects who had built Feodoropolis were long gone, but they had taught their skills to those who had since worked on other projects, not just in the city and its environs – public buildings, a sports arena, the spaceport – but on the high roads that carried commerce to and from the city, and the aqueducts that brought water from distant mountain streams.

Others had designed the steam-powered highwheelers that brought food and other necessities to the capital (not to mention export goods like shinefur and fine wines

to the spaceport), and steam-powered plows, harvesters and threshers that were shared by the militia farmers of the themes. But the lightning power project would be their greatest challenge yet, and not just in terms of the building the generators – although introduction of steam power had already given them experience in precision design and fabrication of boilers, pumps, shafts and other essentials.

The Strymon was broad and deep and swift, and yet it would have to be diverted for a time to allow construction of the dam. There was a stretch a league below the city where the gorge it flowed through broadened into a small valley; a road could be built to bring men and equipment there. But the diversion itself would have to be above the valley, because the future dam would have to span the gorge. That meant a tunnel.

In theory, the tunnel could have been excavated by the engineers who designed it. But that would have been slow work, and exceedingly dangerous for anyone but... Kalla. While they had built the road to the construction site, a relatively easy task that it would have been insulting to them for her take on, she applied herself to the tunnel itself and the geology of its projected route. She'd have to work upwards from the valley; she knew, even before Menander Gabras, the chief engineer, told her the same thing – otherwise, the river would flood the tunnel from the outset and she wouldn't be able to set off any more charges.

They had a steam-powered drill assembly now that, while not as powerful as she was, could sink half a dozen holes simultaneously over a broad front in just the right pattern. But it was she who set the boomer charges, with wicks shorter than those the engineers would have used, to allow them time for them to retreat to a safe distance.

She moved quickly to light them, and was rewarded moments later by a huge explosion that sent pieces of jagged rock crashing against her body.

It was a real turn-on and the next time, she came – fortunately, the sound of the blast drowned out her cries of release. *Better than anything I've been getting from Jayar lately*, she thought. *But after all, he's getting on in years.*

Between explosions, she worked with the engineers, clearing the loose rock and loading it onto a steam-powered carrier to be hauled off and dumped a hundred strides away. She'd knock down any projecting rock that hadn't come loose by itself, and add that to the load. Then it would be time for the drill assembly again, and it was back to work – work that would have been tedious if it hadn't been so enjoyable.

She could see a good distance into the rock with her tachyon vision, but not all the way. So she depended on the engineers to calculate the direction and the slope – the tunnel would rise only gradually from the valley end most of the way, but take a sharp upward turn at the very end, so that it would act like a storm drain. She'd be on her own near the end, or what they calculated was near the end – lest the breakthrough come prematurely at the cost of the drilling crew's lives.

Even if the engineers hadn't been right in their calculations, she could have told them they were near the end – she could see the rest of the way, and hear the rumbling of the river above. She might have hurled herself against the rock and broken through, but that would probably have created a passage too narrow to accommodate the flow of the Strymon. So she patiently applied a hand drill in the prescribed pattern, set what she expected to be the last charges, and...

The roaring water picked her up, along with the loosened rock, and sent her at seemingly lightning speed down the tunnel, spitting her out in the valley – bedraggled, and with what was left of her clothing clinging wetly to her body, concealing nothing. When she picked herself up, and made her way to safe ground, Gabras led the team of engineers in loud cheers. Methodios joined them, having put in a surprise appearance – along with Eusebia.

“I wouldn’t have missed this for the world,” he said. “Neither would she. She’s an apprentice engineer now, part of the team designing the Spinners for the generating system.”

\* \* \*

Building the dam itself, and installation of the generators and other equipment, were left to Gabras and his fellows. They knew their jobs; production of concrete, uruku steel and other necessary materials had reached a scale that made it economical. Only after that was Kalla needed again – to use more boomers and her own might to set off a landside above the dam to collapse the tunnel and send the river back to its original course, but a new purpose.

*And not just the purpose of Jayar, she thought. We shall bring light to the world as well as his palace.*

It was only a few years later that Jayar died. Methodios saw to it that his father was honored in death as Feodor had been, and even leaned on the catapans and other officials to appear at the Petrovousa. All there played their roles as if they believed in them. All except Kyros, who looked sullen, and would hardly speak a word to the others – including the new Patriarch.

She had expected Methodios to appear in her bedchamber, as if in response to a summons. That was how it had been with Jayar, although less frequently in his later years. Instead, there was a knock on her door one night by a steward, who announced that a “lady” needed to see her on personal business.

It was Pateria, the very last person she would have expected to see here.

“I already know that I come unexpected,” she began. “And you must wonder that I come at all. But please hear me out.”

Methodios’ wife was in her forties, her hair beginning to gray, yet still handsome. Trying to accommodate her, Kalla offered her wine: “It’s one of our best export vintages, from the Eastern shore.”

Pateria accepted the goblet gracefully, but ...

“Let me get straight to the point. I know that my husband has inherited the right to take you as his consort. And I understand that, according to your indenture, you are not at liberty to lie with any other man. Am I correct?”

“That is so... Sebasta,” Kalla said, using her feminine version of the honorific by which Patriarchs were addressed.

“I had rather dispense with formalities.”

“Very well.”

There was a pause, then:

“This is extremely difficult,” Pateria said. “I believe as surely as any woman can that Methodios has never been unfaithful to me. That is unusual among the high-born. His father was shameless in his affairs, during both his marriages, and not just with you. Do you find that surprising?”

“I hadn’t known. But I learned early on not to find anything he did surprising.”

“He favored women he could humiliate. I don’t imagine you fall into that class.”

“Jayar is no longer with us.”

“And you know that Methodios is nothing like him. When it became clear that I could not bear him a son, he might have left me for another woman. But he didn’t.”

“It is the man who determines the sex of his offspring,” Kalla pointed out, trying to offer her some comfort. But Pateria ignored that.

“And now I have developed a condition that makes it... uncomfortable to lie with him. The sort of thing in which the physicians of our world take no interest. Any other high-born man, I imagine, would have put me away, or sought a concubine.”

“What am I but a concubine, and yet he has not sought me out.”

“False modesty ill becomes you,” Pateria said, a cross edge in her voice. “You are much more than that. I know it, and the world knows it. You have brought great changes to Andros, with Feodor and even with Jayar. And I know from Eusebia how you worked with Methodios on the Strymon project, though he himself never made anything of it.

“I met Eusebia there,” Kalla said. “She seems very intelligent, and industrious.”

“That she is, and so are Candida and Flavia and Justina and Petronia. Candida would like to become a physician, but even if she succeeds in that ambition, it will be too late to help me, I’m afraid.”

*Perhaps we could get help from Fujiwakoku,* Kalla thought. But that too could not come soon enough, at least not for Pateria.

“And I’m afraid for what might befall my daughters when... Methodios has done all he can for them, but... Kyros hates him, and hates anyone dear to him. He hates you, calls you the ‘low consort’ and worse. And yet Andros will have to live under his rule one day.”

“A distant day, one hopes.”

“Kyros wishes otherwise. That assassination attempt, had it succeeded, would have put you in his thrall. Yes, I’ve put two and two together; I’m not a fool. And so has Methodios; he was never a fool. But he feels that his hands are tied, that he must bow to tradition when it comes to the succession – and that, absent incontrovertible proof, he cannot act against Kyros without compromising the legitimacy of the Patriarchate itself.”

“But what can I do?”

Pateria was silent for a moment. Then:

“You can protect Methodios. Ensure that he lives until your term of indenture has been fulfilled. And you can offer him a kind of love I can no longer share with him. I pray that he may live happier and therefore the longer for it, long enough to free you of any obligation to Kyros.”

“And after that?”

*“Protect my daughters, and their loved ones. You must swear it.”*

“I swear,” Kalla said, after only a moment’s hesitation.

\* \* \*

Methodios came to her bedchamber the next evening. She said nothing about Pateria’s visit, but she knew that the Patriarch’s wife had accomplished her purpose. Kalla had promises to keep. And that night she began to keep them.

# Part Two: Methodios

## 1. Onward and Upward

There wasn't any practical use for the first hot air ship on Andros. It couldn't stay up very long, it couldn't go very far, and couldn't have carried any cargo even if they'd had a greater range – and could have been steered.

But the symbolism was all-important. For the first time, ordinary people could take to the air, could see the land stretched out around them as they had never seen it before. Steam power and lightning power might increasingly fuel the economy, but hot air ships fueled the imagination.

Patriarch Methodios had been the first to take flight, and it was a solo flight. That might seem dangerous, but Kalla was there on the ground ready to come to his rescue should anything go amiss. Nothing did, which was a relief to both of them – an accident would have defeated their whole purpose.

Tens of thousands of Androssians had turned out to witness the first ascent one bright and sunny day at the spaceport outside Feodoropolis, which wouldn't be needed by the Scalantrans again for three years. The hot air bag, once inflated, displayed the old Romaic icon of a double-headed eagle, which had fallen into disuse here on Andros but which the Patriarch deemed especially appropriate for the occasion.

Filling the bag without letting it catch fire was a tricky business, but the ground crew had practiced for weeks – in a remote meadow out of sight of the capital and its environs. The crew was equally practiced at holding the ropes, and using them to

maneuver the bag, once filled, to where the basket could be attached. Nothing could be allowed to go wrong here.

When Methodios climbed into the basket, he looked rather awkward, and looked all the more so when he picked up a truncated metal cone to make himself heard better by the crowd. But he didn't betray any embarrassment, and his words before he lifted off were as modest as the flight itself.

"Some years ago, I had the idea for a metal sphere with all the air pumped out to make such a flight as this," he said. "That didn't work out, and I've been told it's never worked out anywhere else. But what you see before you today is a proven technology that has worked everywhere it's been tried – just like steam power and lightning power. There are still other technologies that we can and shall bring to our world, to improve the lives of all our people. Let this flight be a pledge of that."

With that, the crew let loose the restraining ropes, and the airship rose into the sky. Not very far into it; only 100 strides, but it *rose*. It also drifted with the wind, which would have taken it past the spaceport and over a nearby forest – not the best place to land. Methodios pulled another rope to vent the hot air just enough to assure a soft touchdown, scrambling out of the basket before the bag could collapse over him. He was in plenty of time.

"That's one small flight for a man," he told the crowd. "Let us all work for greater flights to come. We can't hold back now."

Kalla was nearby, and his words triggered a sudden memory of their first night together, after swearing her oath to Pateria. That oath was something that remained unspoken between them – but hardly anything else did.

“I still remember that day in the Preserve,” he confessed as she undressed for him. “The day you saved me from the brightbear. You were practically naked then, and you were a living goddess – like Aphrodite, the goddess of love, of whom the ancients desired as I desired you. Only...”

“Only?”

“I have since learned that you are also Athena, the goddess of wisdom, courage, inspiration, civilization, law and justice, just warfare, strength, strategy, the arts, crafts, and skill.”

Kalla actually blushed, a rare thing for her.

“I’m just *interested* in things,” she said after a moment. “From when I first left Velor, I wanted to *learn* things. And I was fortunate enough to become the Companion of a man who also wanted to learn things, and *do* things. Great things.”

“Are the other Companions like you?”

“Not exactly.”

Methodios gave her a puzzled look.

“Not that they weren’t curious,” Kalla said. “They wanted to know if men like you had hairy penises.”

That got a laugh out of him.

“Were they disappointed to learn otherwise?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“Well, I suppose *I’ll* be the one learning some new things tonight. I could never quite understand how an invulnerable goddess like you can pleasure or be pleased by an ordinary man – why the man wouldn’t end up like that brightbear.”

“Surely you’ve heard about this,” Kalla said, donning her gold necklace.

“Of course I have. It just doesn’t make any *sense*.”

“It *works*. That’s all that counts.”

“It doesn’t seem to have any effect on your breasts,” Methodios observed. “They might as well be marble.”

“Feel them.”

He complied, and at his touch her nipples stiffened.

“Squeeze them hard,” she urged him, and his face lit up as he discovered that he could dimple them – not very deeply, but enough to prove a point.

“Do they feel like marble?” she teased him.

Methodios shook his head and kept squeezing; she let out a sigh of pleasure. He tried to squeeze her nipples, too, but apparently didn’t think he was having much luck, for he broke off, even though she was enjoying it audibly.

“They look as hard as spitter pellets,” he said.

“Only, you wouldn’t want to bite a spitter pellet,” she advised him. “But you’ll love biting these.”

He took her left nipple in his teeth...

“Harder,” she urged him. “Bite it as hard as you can! Then the other!”

As he complied, a bolt of pleasure raced from her nipples to her womanhood – a womanhood that now ached to be filled.

“I’m ready,” she said. “Are you ready?”

Kalla lay back on the bed, and spread her legs in invitation.

Methodios cast his robe aside. He was ready. Very ready. But he seemed to be amazed when he knelt down to join her that he could actually *enter* her, bury himself in her to the hilt. He paused then, making only tentative strokes.

“Don’t hold back!” she urged him. “Lay me with a will.”

Only then did the Patriarch really let himself go – and make her come and come again with his powerful strokes. She yelped and screamed as he triggered her pleasure centers; that made him thrust all the harder until he exploded inside her.

Kalla didn’t want the night to end there, and neither did Methodios.

That night, and many nights afterwards, they had explored all the ways of love, and their relationship had deepened after the death of Pateria five years later – from an ailment that, like the one which had led her to approach Kalla in the first place, could be neither understood nor treated on this world. She had reproached herself for not having studied medicine, and vowed to amend that failure the next time the *Bountiful Voyager* called....

\* \* \*

Kalla came back to herself at the spaceport, savoring her memories of her nights with Methodios.

Jayar at his best had never brought her such joy, not only because he was a clumsy lover who had no real feeling for her, but because there had been nothing in him to admire – nothing to share, nothing for them to build together. She’d always had to work around him rather than with him.

Methodios came forward to embrace her, and the crowd cheered them both. But none could hear what he whispered in her ear now.

“I can tell this went over better than marsh gas. Not that we don’t need marsh gas, but there isn’t any romance in it.”

\* \* \*

Marsh gas had been known for generations, but only as a nuisance – nobody wanted to live near a smelly marsh, where the water couldn’t support fish or any edible vegetation. But when Kalla had read about it in a text about fossil fuels on other worlds, she’d had a sudden revelation – knowing how it was produced meant that it could be *cultivated*, and used to fuel lightning power generators.

Some of Methodios’ counselors had laughed. “You should try collecting farts,” one said. Unfortunately, word of that had gotten back to Kyros, who spread the story far and wide. But Methodios had stood by her idea. Not only that, but his daughter Flavia – the most mischievous one in the family – was taken with it, and even sketched out her own plans for the project and designs for the cultivating tanks.

“Our communities are still widely scattered,” she explained. “It makes sense to produce the marsh gas on a local basis, instead of having some huge factory and then running strings up and down the Great Northern Road and other high roads. You can find marshy areas almost anywhere, and because they were never considered worth clearing, they’re among the few places outside the Northern Reach where pre-human vegetation still prevails. It’s no good to us for anything else because of the lifecyphers, but it’s organic – it rots if it isn’t exposed to air, and that’s what counts.”

Flavia wasn’t one to take credit where credit wasn’t due. The tank designs were inspired by similar ones shown in imported texts, but would make use of local materials. “But the whole plan wouldn’t work if it weren’t for the pre-human vegetation. It takes a

lot of rotting plant material to produce the gas in sufficient quantity. We can't afford to sacrifice food crops, and we don't produce enough refuse – but the pre-human marsh plants will *grow back* if we give them a chance. They're a renewable resource.”

“She's got it all worked out,” Methodios had said proudly. “This is for the best.”

Segilla, a small town on the Great Northern Road, was chosen by Flavia as the site of the first marsh gas tank farm. There was nothing remarkable about the place, except that it was closer to a marsh than most, minimizing logistical problems. Once a steady supply of the gas could be produced, the small population ensured that lightning power could quickly be brought to all the homes and businesses there – and even to a church still attended by a few.

It had been at Segilla that Feodor first told her about boomers and spitters. Had they too been “for the best?” They had brought death and destruction; and yet, without them, he would never have defeated Festus, and history would have taken a different and darker course on this world. There would never have been steam power or lightning power – at least not for many more generations – and the people of Segilla and its surrounding farms would have been reduced to serfs.

Strange that she had been thinking dark thoughts then, when Methodios and his daughter were working to bring a new kind of light to Segilla. They should have all been happy, and they were. And yet there was a shadow looming in the future: the shadow of Kyros. Methodios had insisted that it was for the best not to do anything about his half-brother and heir. But was it?

\* \* \*

When lightning power came to Segilla, it did more than light people's homes at night. Graduates of the mechanical engineering program at the Academy had devised ways to apply that power to crafts like weaving and carpentry, just as steam power had been applied to transportation and large-scale manufacturing.

If the Academy hadn't also devised ways to teach the townspeople and the militia farmers of the surrounding countryside, there'd have been nothing to celebrate the night the lights came on – or afterwards. One thing would have come as a relief to them, had the people been aware of the alternative: one of the biology people at the Academy had come up with a gummy substance derived from sick trees that was now used to coat the copper strings. There had been a few accidents in Nesalonika, despite warnings – and the coatings had conserved power as well.

But on that night of nights, the people of Segilla knew all about the strings that had been stretched from pole to pole or even tree to tree between the lightning power plant and the town, and from there to its homes and businesses. They knew about the globes that would come alight at the turning of a lever at the plant. They knew about the mechanics of the lightning-powered looms and saws.

What they didn't know about, or at least didn't appreciate, was the leading role that Flavia and Eusebia before her and other women of the Academy after them had played in the development of this new source of power. Segilla was still a conservative community, more so than Feodoropolis or Nesalonika or other larger population centers.

Methodios had brooded about that with Kalla and his daughters on the afternoon before the ceremony. It was politic to credit the Academy as an institution rather than

any individuals, he explained – he wouldn't mention the women, but neither would he mention the men.

“And I shall not mention marsh gas, either,” he added. “That might put us in bad odor.”

But he couldn't hide the fact that he wished he could give public credit to Eusebia and Flavia and the rest.

“They might neither believe nor understand,” he said. “But understand this: there is something neither they nor anyone else can take away from you: the knowledge that you have done the work, and done it well, and can take pride in it. Future generations will learn from childhood what you have accomplished here, and those generations will, I trust, have also learned that women are just as capable as men.”

Methodios addressed the townspeople and the farmers in the town square after dusk. He recounted the history of steam power and lightning power, and the role of the Academy in bringing these to Andros. He praised the Segillans for their hard work and their loyalty to the Patriarchy. But he kept glancing at an hourglass, a duplicate of which had been taken to the power station by Eusebia. When the sands ran out in both at the same time, he knew what to say.

“Let there be light!”

And there was light, and it was good.

*For the best, Kalla thought. For tonight. But for tomorrow... we shall see.*

\* \* \*

Marsh gas cultivation soon spread to other communities. But where marshes were lacking, engineers from the Academy, where Menander Gabras had taken up

teaching, designed huge windmills of uruku steel with lightweight vanes of Sidero wood – large enough to catch even the lighter breezes that prevailed inland. That was how lightning power came to Feodoropolis, where, in any case, marsh gas had been in bad repute.

Kyros had made a big thing of that, but hadn't figured out a way to discredit the wind. It was different with the water gas used for airships. Lightning power could also be used to produce water gas, but one accident might be enough to discredit the program make long-range air travel a commercial venture. Tethered ascents short journeys in hot air ships had become popular in Nesalonika as well as the capital, but they could never serve as more than entertainment.

The problem had weighed on her mind, even though there hadn't yet been an effort to build a commercial airship." We need to discuss something," she said one night.

She was wearing an imported robe. It was clearly time for talk, not love.



“Kyros is Kyros,” Methodios said, after she had voiced her fear that he might use an aerial misadventure against them. “There’s nothing we can do about that.”

“But there’s something else we *can* do. Sun gas is safe, even if it doesn’t have as much lifting power. We must have it in our atmosphere, but we don’t have any way to detect it, let alone extract it. Producing it from water gas, as the sun does, is far beyond our capabilities – and I’m sure the expense would be prohibitive, even if we had such technology.”

“We could use more technical assistance.”

“Not just books. People. Expert people.”

“But would any such travel here? Leave their own homeworlds?”

“That is the question, I mean to put it to the Scalantrans.”

The *Bountiful Voyager* arrived on time for the next trade fair. Only it wasn’t the *Bountiful Voyager*. At least, it didn’t *look* like the *Bountiful Voyager*.

Yet if Kalla didn’t recognize the ship, she and Methodios both recognized Cherya – older, but still hale.

She could sense their confusion, so she enlightened them right off.

“Vendorian steel,” she said, gesturing back at the ship. “Lighter but stronger. And with greater capacity. The new *Bountiful Voyager*.”

“Is that anything like uruku steel?” Kalla asked.

“No. A totally new thing, and from a new source. But the important thing is what it *means*. We can travel faster now, visit our worlds more often, perhaps add more to our circuit. But we’re keeping to the original schedule for our first round of stops, while investigating other options. We don’t want to put anyone out.”

“This is extraordinary,” Methodios said. “I’m sure that you’ll have a lot to tell us, Perhaps you could address the Academy again.”

“I look forward to it. But right now, there’s somebody I want you to meet.”

She spoke into her communication device.

Kalla expected it would be a new trade captain. She would have to organize a reception to acquaint him or her with the traders, who even now were setting up their displays. But why hadn’t Cherya simply brought him or her off the ship with her in the first place?

“When last we met, you appealed for greater knowledge of medicine,” Cherya told her now. “Today I bring that knowledge, the very embodiment of that knowledge.”

The “somebody,” who emerged from the ship in response to her summons wasn’t a Scalantran, but a human, A funny-looking human with funny-looking eyes.

“Hayama Tofky,” Cherya introduced him. “*Doctor Hayama Tofky.*”

Another revolution had come to Andros, she realized, a revolution as profound as that of lightning power. And with faster travel, there might be more to come...

## **2. The Wages of Curiosity**

It was precisely because life on Andros was changing beyond recognition that Kalla decided the planet needed to preserve its history better. But it was also because Nestor, eldest grandson of Methodios, had become fascinated with that history – and the history of the universe.

Nestor had been just ten when Dr. Hayama saved his life by operating to remove his infected worm tube. The good doctor had tried to explain about it to the boy during a family gathering to celebrate his recovery, but had trouble getting across.

“If the worm tube isn’t good for anything, why do we have it?” Nestor asked.

“It used to be good for something. Your remote ancestors used it to help digest leaves.”

“Why would anybody eat leaves? Didn’t the first people here have anything else to eat?”

“Not the first people here. Much longer ago than that. Much, *much* longer. Long before humans as we know existed on the world our people came here from. But when our distant ancestors became human, they retained some things that weren’t useful any more. For that matter, we’ve kept far older things that aren’t useful any more. You have a remnant of what used to be a tail bone. And you have nipples – those aren’t good for anything, at least on boys.”

“But *why?*”

“All varieties of living things undergo changes over time. It’s a natural process involving alterations in what we call lifecyphers.”

“I don’t understand that,” Nestor said, turning a bit petulant. “Are you just making it up?”

Rulav Tornikios quickly reproved his son.

“You are being very disrespectful to the man you owe your life to.”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Hayama,” a chastened Nestor replied. Rulav and Eusebia looked relieved. So did Methodios.

\* \* \*

Truth be told, the boy did understand some limits. It was only a few days later, when he encountered Kalla in the palace while his father was there seeing to business

with Methodios, that he asked a question he must have known would have been inappropriate at the gathering.

“Why does Dr. Hayama look so funny?”

“Because he comes from another world,” she said. “People from different worlds often look ‘funny’ to us.”

“But you come from another world, and *you* don’t look funny.”

Kalla tried to explain, but she wasn’t sure she could get through to him any better than the doctor.

“It’s like this,” she said. “People on other worlds came from different places on another world called Earth, and people in different parts of that world didn’t all speak the same way or look the same way.”

“Why?”

“It’s part of that same process Dr. Hayama talked about, living things changing over time. Only when that happened back on Earth, people didn’t have horses, let alone steam carriages or airships. All they could do was walk. And some would walk so far that they lost touch with the places they came from, and when they changed it was in their new homes; the cousins they left behind stayed the same or changed in different ways.”

“None of them could fly, like you?”

“We were *designed* to fly, by the beings who took us to what became our world. Those same beings designed other humans on other worlds in other ways, but here on Andros and most other worlds, they left the original model alone.”

*Assuming the Terrans of historical times were the original model, she thought. Could the Galen have been tampering with Terran lifecyphers even before the dawn of their recorded history?*

But Nestor didn't give her time to finish that thought.

"Do your people have children, like us? Grandfather says you can't have them here, but on your own world?"

"Yes," Kalla said, because, technically, it was true. And she didn't think Nestor would understand about the Maternity Engine, and how it made children to order, made them to class, made them to fulfill their assigned roles in society. Of course, they also had individual characteristics, but they didn't necessarily have anything to do with those of the parents who raised them...

It was strange, Kalla thought, that her feeling for Nestor was almost what they called "maternal," although her relationship to him, if it could be described in Androssian terms, was more like that of a maiden aunt. Had she somehow been programmed for that, programmed by accident? Or was in something deeper in human lifecyphers that the Galen had never erased?

*The Naturalists*, she suddenly thought. They too had come out of the Maternity Engine, and yet... Well, they had their own world now, but from what she'd heard Aurea wasn't exactly a planet of love, maternal or otherwise...

Nestor had apparently lost interest in the matter, because now he wanted to talk about other things, like a great ox he'd seen recently in the country, where his mother had gone to work on another power station.

"We don't need great oxen any more, do we? People keep them just for show."

Because great oxen could survive on Earth-normal feed, even though they were native to the planet, Kalla suspected that they must be another example of redesign – but it might just be happenstance and, in any case, she didn't want to get into all *that* again.

“A few people still use them, but just in remote areas, or if they can't afford steam highwheelers.”

“Don't they have lightning power?”

“Not all of them, not yet. That's your mother's job, to bring it to more places. It came into service here only a few years ago. You remember that. Your mother brought it to Nesalonika just the year before you were born.”

“She told me you did most of the work.”

“Only on the tunnel, to divert the river so they could build the dam and the power station. It was her design. Your Aunt Flavia designed the marsh gas system for places without water power.”

\* \* \*

Her conversation with Nestor got her to thinking. Steam-powered highwheelers were everywhere now, and there were even personal steam carriages for Androssians who could afford them.

Steam power had become an industry, and so had lightning power. There were factories devoted to production of steam-powered vehicles, pumps and equipment of all sorts; other factories for production of copper string and a growing number of domestic devices using the power those strings carried – from lamps to looms.

With large families still common in the countryside, and steam-powered plowing and harvesting vehicles being introduced in the landed estates and even in the farms of the rural militia – small farmers couldn't afford them yet, but the themes could share the expense – young people were moving to the larger towns to find work in the factories and businesses supported by the factories.

That sort of thing wasn't allowed anywhere near Feodoropolis, which remained free of the smoke and noise of industry. But people in the capital were making fortunes from it; Kyros had invested in highwheeler manufacture. That didn't bother Kalla at all – it gave him a further stake in the planet's progress, and thus less cause to make any trouble, now or in years to come as Patriarch....

She pushed that thought aside now to focus on her latest initiative. Had anything ever been written about the origin of the great oxen, of how they came to be used as draft animals, she wondered later. Would anyone remember how important they had been, a century hence?

How much did anyone know of history here on Andros? People knew about their own families, for a few generations back; they knew the lineage of the patriarchs, knew what was taking place in their own lifetimes. There were records of the Great Synod and of the church, statutes and decrees, but the closest thing to a narrative had to do with the collective memory of the Androssians' ancestors back on Earth.

Kalla was familiar with the *Suda*, that compendium of Romaic literary, scientific and historical lore that the Seeders had suffered the first transportees to Andros to bring with them, but had never found it of much use because its references were generally brief and written for readers back on Earth who had shared a cultural context now lost.

There was the Bible, of course, but that had nothing to say of the Romaic Empire on Earth that had succeeded the Roman Empire of Biblical times – and the Bible itself, seen as a historical rather than a religious text, also assumed a context now lost. The Scalantrans had never had contact with Earth itself, but Kalla had been able to piece together a rough outline of its history from records they had shared about peoples of other Seeded worlds.

Methodios was surprised when she took an interest in Androssian records. The earliest, dating back to the Seeding, were still at the old palace in Ethrata – if rot hadn't gotten to them. Official actions of the Patriarch and the Great Synod had been recorded in bound volumes, and brought to Feodoropolis – originals, or copies if the originals were in poor condition. There were also copies of some ecclesiastical records, from the originals held by the Church.

"It's all ancient history," he told her. "I thought we were supposed to be looking to the future."

"We *are* looking to the future," Kalla said. "But we have to understand where we came from, what makes us what we are."

"We?"

"I feel as if I've become a part of this world, strange as that may seem."

The patriarch laughed.

"Doctor Hayama was telling me the same thing a few days ago. And he hasn't lived here nearly as long, nor will he ever."

"I really ought to talk with him, too. About the history of his world. We might learn something of value if we knew the histories of other Seeded worlds."

“Perhaps your fellow Companions there could assist with that,” Methodios said.

She couldn’t tell at first whether he was serious or just humoring her.

For the time being, she enlisted Petronia, youngest of Methodios’ daughters, to help her sort through records to which the Patriarch had given access. Petronia seemed headed for an academic career in any case, having just married a philosophy professor named Alexios Komnenos.

Alexios was busy trying to figure out how the physics of tiny particles of matter – or *were* they particles? – could be reconciled with the realist philosophy of Aristotle that his forebears had brought from Earth. Kalla didn’t see how the indefinite behavior of such particles was any more of a problem than the indefinite nature of pi or the square root of two; but for some reason, it put him in a bad mood.

Petronia was sure he’d get over it, but in the meantime she welcomed a chance to join her father’s Companion for a trip to Ethrata. “He’s a sweet man,” she told Kalla. “He just gets carried away sometimes. But he’ll be back to his old self by the time we return. Who knows, maybe we’ll have something to celebrate by then. I’m late with my period.”

Kalla only nodded. She knew the facts of life here on Andros, even if they weren’t the same as on Velor. They rode a steam carriage southwards from Feodoropolis, with a driver recommended by Methodios. Had Kalla not been with her, Petronia would have rated a guardian escort, but that was hardly necessary under the actual circumstances.

She had known Petronia and the older children since she and Methodios had become lovers, and had worked with Eusebia and Flavia on patriarchal projects. But she couldn’t say that she had ever been on intimate terms with them, and it was the

same here – at least at first. She tried to keep their conversation to the object of their journey, and it was Petronia who took it elsewhere.

“I know you’ve been good for our world,” she said. “But you’ve also been good for Father. I didn’t understand that at first, and I think the others must have understood it even less. But I think Mother understood it, understood that he needed a woman in his life, and not just any woman. You’ve loved him. I can tell that. And been true to him. A woman... like you... could easily find... other diversions.”

“Not according to my indenture.”

“Would anyone on your world know? Would anyone there even *care*? I know why they sent you here, and their part ended with your sale. Do you ever hear from them? I’m sure Father would have told me if you had.”

Kalla shook her head. The Scalantrans had on rare occasions brought general advisories from the Senate and the High Council, of new worlds she had never heard of opened to trade, or rivalries with the Aureans and the Diaboli. But nothing that had been of the slightest relevance to her personally, or to her work here.

“It’s as I thought,” Petronia said. “You no longer exist for them. You’re only some entry in an old trade agreement.”

Kalla felt a sudden anguish, thinking of the world she would never see again, the kin she would never see again – they were probably gone by now, she realized; living in a gold field shortened their lives. Had the authorities even told them where she was, anything about her life here?

“I’m sorry,” Petronia said, seeing the look on her face.

“It’s all right,” Kalla insisted, not very convincingly.

“You’re one of *us* now. Take comfort in that. You’ve been wise counsel as well as lover to Father, and he really needed that – still needs it now, more than ever. We may all need it, one of these days.”

*One of these days...*

“May that day never come,” Kalla said, understanding the allusion to Kyros and the succession. But while she took it no further, she knew the ice had been broken. Her relationship with the family of the Patriarch was taking a new turn...

Ethrata was a larger town now than it had been when Kalla first saw it, but only because it had become a center for production of salted seafood and seaweed products that were shipped inland. The former palace itself no longer appeared impressive, only grim. The approach to the gate brought memories of the day she had saved Jayar, and won the acclaim of Feodor’s men – but that had been nearly a century ago. No one else living could remember it or, probably, even care.

What had once been the palace of the patriarchs was now the headquarters of a provincial government, headed by a catapan named Exaugustus Boioannes, rather grim in appearance himself, who had been advised of their coming.

Boioannes seemed to feel obligated to show them around the offices that had once been patriarchal chambers. Kalla recognized nothing; the former furnishings were long gone, replaced by desks where dutiful bureaucrats were busy doing... whatever dutiful bureaucrats did. There were cabinets and shelves filled with provincial records of no interest to her or Petronia. Having done his dutiful duty, the catapan eventually left them free to explore the warrens where the oldest records were kept.

Most of what they found was of no greater interest than the catapan's records – routine accounts and inventories, policy directives that no longer applied to anything. But Petronia's attention was caught by a small piece of parchment, folded over and used a marker in a volume devoted to provincial organization in the time of Feodor's father Basil Andros.

It might have easily been overlooked, but it turned out to be a real find: the draft of an appeal Basil had read to his warriors before the Battle of Kourtikios' Woods, first of the engagements on the main continent that led to its unification under his rule:

*Be valiant, I pray you, remember the courage of your ancestors, and don't disgrace them by placing your trust in your feet alone! He who dares to fight like a man will overcome the strength of the enemy. Try to follow in the footsteps of your ancestors, and abandon now any idea of flight. All the world should know that you are men of courage.*

"It's in his own hand," Petronia said – and actually wept. "It's almost as if I were holding his hand, across the years."

She saw the way Kalla was looking at her.

"It was a terrible time, of course," she said, recovering her composure. "A time of war, and of battles now forgotten. I don't have any idea where Kourtikios' Woods was, or even if it still exists – it might have been cut down a century ago. But we got through it, and Feodor set us on a better path. With a great deal of help from you, of course."

Kalla thought it was time to get something off her mind.

"Does it ever bother you that I knew Feodor and you never could?"

“That you live so long? I suppose it should. And yet I think perhaps it may not be an unmixed blessing. You have so much more to lose. You’ve lost Feodor and Ignatios, and the friends you used to have among the Scalantrans – yes, Father’s told me about that. And you’ve lost everyone you knew on Velor. It must weigh on you at times.”

“But I’ve had more to gain, too,” Kalla replied, after a moment. “I’ve lived to know Methodios... and you. I’ve lived to see a world grow and prosper, and to find happiness in the role I’ve played in that. Perhaps it’s a maternal instinct. Women aren’t supposed to feel that sort of thing where I came from.”

There were other old records to go through, often relating to old wars – including the one she’d taken part in with Feodor. All ancient history now, she hoped. But there might be other challenges to come...

*May we never need war again,* Kalla thought. *But may we have the courage to face whatever hazards the future may bring.*

### **3. Foreign Aid**

Kalla had broached the idea of direct technological assistance from offworld, as opposed to instructional texts with unfamiliar terminology that Androssians would have to figure out for themselves, during Cherya’s first visit with the new *Bountiful Voyager*, but she hadn’t really expected it to bear fruit in only eight years.

Yet there they were: a contingent of engineers from Indra. The news sheets, which had grown in number and readership with advances in printing and education, couldn’t get enough of it, although the fact that Indrans weren’t quite comfortable with Romaic caused confusion at first.

It was all as confusing to Kalla as to anyone else; she hadn't yet had a chance to speak with Cherya, who had already headed for the Academy to finalize arrangements for another presentation. She'd been running late with official duties; there was a new trade captain, Shabam by name, and she had to introduce him to the merchants – of whom there were considerably greater numbers than when she'd first taken on the job.

It was Shabam who introduced her to the Indrans, but he was at pains to remind her that she would have to discuss compensation for the engineers with Methodios. The press of other business with the merchants had held her up. As for the news sheet people, they'd introduced themselves – the Indrans stood out in the crowd with their uniformly black hair and skin in various shades of brown.

The women were wearing some sort of wrap, which covered their forms loosely and flowed into long, decorative drapes in front of the legs. They didn't appear to be wearing any bodices, and indeed their breasts seemed to be unrestrained. The men, by contrast, wore stitched coats and pants. All displayed medallions on their chests, which Kalla took to be emblems of their Guild although she couldn't understand the writing on them.

Even before Shabam had advised her of it, Kalla had been aware that some kind of trade deal would have to be worked out with the Indrans, but the next day she was eager to meet them in any case in order to clear up the confusion about their plans, in hopes that the news sheets would follow suit.

What was this business about mining for sun gas, and what did it have to do with the moon? It became clear when she got a chance to meet alone with the visitors from the Guild of Resource Engineers and discuss the matter in Scalantran – Romaic simply

didn't have all the right words, and they'd had to guess at some of the equivalents to Scalantran terms.

There were ten altogether. Three of the men – Kumar, Samudra and Chandra – and three of the women – Akshita, Patali and Dhruva – had meant to establish a base station on the nearest moon, Aoide. The others – Kamana, Rudra, Devaki and Kami – were to be stationed on Andros itself. Akshita, the *mukhiya*, or leader of the group, got right to the point.

“We'd expected to be extracting sun gas from subterranean deposits on Andros,” she explained. “But Shabam told us that you hadn't discovered, let alone developed such resources; we were prepared for another contingency – so as we approached for a landing, we directed our instruments at Alkmene.”

Largest and outermost of the Triple Moons. Even before Kalla had flown there, it was known to have a tenuous atmosphere, unlike Aoide and Adonia. But the Indrans had discovered that sun gas was a major component of that atmosphere. They had had the foresight to come equipped with the technology to extract the gas, and components for a space ship that could be assembled in orbit to carry them and their apparatus to the outer moon instead of the inner one. But the Scalantrans would have departed the system by the time their project was underway, and that left the problem of getting themselves, and the sun gas, back to Andros.

“Our fuel is limited; in any case, our ship isn't designed for a planetary landing,” Akshita explained. “But Shabam assured us that you could help. Your capabilities are surely equal to Liessa's.”

*Shabam's taking a lot for granted*, she thought. But before she could dwell on that, the Indran relieved her anxiety.

"Of course, your services would be part of our payment," Akshita added with a smile. "As for the rest, we can accept shinefur. The first consignment, at least, should be loaded on the *Bountiful Voyager* to be delivered to the Guild at its next call to Indra, but details can be negotiated."

Kalla wanted to ask about Liessa, but it wasn't the right time. Anyway, chances were they wouldn't even know the Companion although, like most people on their world, they would know *of* her.

"You seem to have some experience with commerce," she said.

"The first guilds, in our old Terran homeland of Bharat, were strictly commercial," explained Kumar, who seemed to be their equivalent of a historian. "Strictly local, too, as transportation was slow, even at the height of the Gupta Empire. They represented traders in cloth, food grains, spices, salt and other commodities. But there also came to be federations of guilds from different cities, some rich and powerful enough to offer monetary help to the government. And to protect their trade against outlaws, some of the guilds even had their own militias."

"Did engineers have guilds back then?" Kalla asked.

"There weren't any engineers then, at least too few to form a guild; but once we recovered from the shock of being taken some 750 Terran years ago to a strange world by beings with wondrous technologies, we naturally wanted to emulate them. Yet we had the experience of the guild system, and adapted it to a new form of commerce. We trade for goods and services with the traditional guilds, and with the government, and

even with each other – the spacecraft we mean to assemble here came from the Guild of Air and Space Transport Engineers.”

Kalla was startled by that.

“Not from the Scalantrans?” she asked.

“We’ve made great progress over the past few centuries,” Kumar said proudly. “Insystem space travel is well-established, and we are working on interstellar capability. We had already built an air transport system based on heavier-than-air craft with wings and reaction engines rather than navigable air ships, but that in turn was made possible only by an industrial base and abundant fossil fuel resources that Andros lacks – or at least has not yet sought to take advantage of.”

“But someday...” Kalla ventured.

“The Scalantrans aren’t revealing any of their secrets,” Kumar said with a wry smile. “Neither are the Vendorians – not that we’ve ever seen them, and nobody back home has any idea where they come from. The Seeders, whoever they are, must have even more advanced space technology. But just knowing it’s *possible* gives us hope. Our time to reach other stars will surely come... and perhaps even yours.”

\* \* \*

Kalla caught up with Cherya the next day at the Academy, as the historian was preparing to regale the students about the secrets of the Olympians, who had been the Seeders of Andros hundreds of years gone.

“Sorry we missed each other at the fair,” the historian said. “But Shabam told me you had a frank discussion with him and Akshita. I’m sure everything will work out, and

that your people will be taking to the air before long. It was Liessa's idea, and she'll be overjoyed. She sends you her regards."

"Liessa?"

"The Guild still holds her indenture, after all."

Kalla wanted to learn more. But there wasn't time for Cherya to say any more, because it was time for her presentation. And while she never mentioned Liessa in her remarks, she couldn't resist starting off with an announcement of the sun gas project on Alkmene.

"Alkmene, as you may know, was named for the mother of Heracles, one of the mythological heroes of ancient Hellas," she said. "Her name meant 'might of the moon,' and she is said to have been the tallest, most beautiful woman of the land, with wisdom surpassed by no other person born of mortal parents. But she was tricked into sleeping with Zeus, who took the form of her husband, and the rest is... pseudo-history, although the Olympians might beg to differ. They're strange that way."

Strange enough that they too believed the Greek gods and demi-gods had been real people, enhanced by the Galen like the Velorians more than 1,500 years later, and that some Olympians were their remote descendants – only those were said to have left the planet for good after becoming Seeders for Andros and other worlds.

"Be that as it may, the remaining Olympians regard themselves as the true heirs of Hellenic culture," Cherya continued. "The Hellenes were the first Terran culture to believe that the gods were human in form, rather than birds or beasts, and this was reflected in their art. The human body was seen as both secular and sacred. Statues of naked gods and goddesses like Zeus and Aphrodite would be likewise be modeled on

living, breathing men and women. They even painted their statues to make them appear more lifelike, and the Olympians have followed that tradition in new works as well as copies of those like this version of the goddess of love.”



The image she projected was indeed quite lifelike, and the students seemed to be impressed – but also puzzled.

“Who’s that with her?” one asked.

“I don’t know,” Cherya confessed. “Apparently the Olympians don’t, either. Their ancestors brought only a set of images that they later worked from.”

Methodios, who honored the lecture with his presence, sitting next to Kalla, took the occasion to kiss her, whispering that she was far better endowed – he might be in his 60’s, but he wasn’t ready to retire as a lover yet, especially since Dr. Hayama had come up with an elixir that worked wonders on his libido...

As for Cherya, whose appreciation for what worked with humans and what didn’t was necessarily second-hand at best, she continued to expound on other aspects of Olympian culture – real or speculated.

The incident might have been completely forgotten, except that the news sheets had covered the presentation, and picked up on it. While it wasn’t yet practical, and would probably have been inadvisable, to run pictures of the statue, it was described in some detail.

“Are we now to be taught our own history, and that of our forebears, by inhuman infidels?” railed Episkopos Pertinax, a conservative member of the Great Synod, a few days later. “And display of obscene ‘art’ in the bargain?” Bishops no longer exercised any secular power, and even their moral authority was waning, but he was said to be a confidant of Kyros, which gave him a platform.

“We shouldn’t pay any attention to people like Impertinax,” Methodios reassured Cherya and the family. “He speaks for a dead past. We speak for a living future.”

\* \* \*

Kyros himself was soon in the news again, but not in a way to his liking. It had to do with an alleged attempt by one of his businesses in the capital to circumvent quality standards for an order of wind vanes being let out for bid by the city government for an expansion of the lightning power system. The eparch of police, Diomedes Phokas, had headed the investigation, but he and his factiones had found little to go on. In the event, the wind vanes had passed inspection.

Kyros had kept a low profile in recent years, while forging alliances with business magnates and the landed estates through his wife Labinia Komnenos. But now, in an apparent bid for popularity, he began sponsoring steam car races – which he claimed were in the tradition of chariot races on Earth. People wagered on them, and Kyros was said to profit from that by taking a substantial percentage of the betting pool.

Then there was the death of his father-in-law, Batatzes Komnenos, There wasn't any evidence of foul play; he had drowned when his boat capsized during a storm. But since Batatzes and his wife Placidia hadn't had any children besides Labinia, Kyros had been left in effective control of his estate.

The Patriarchal heir's Komnenos kin were distant cousins, if related at all to the family of Alexios, which came from Boreanatolika, northeastern region of the Romanian continent. They'd never had anything to do with each other, even before the reign of Kyros – and Alexios' parents, Andronikos and Eirene, said they wanted to keep it that way.

“We should have as little as possible to do with any of Kyros people,” Methodios advised. “As for Kyros, himself he seems to be obsessed only with accumulating wealth, and progress can mean only greater wealth for him. It’s in his own interest.”

\* \* \*

“You really didn’t know?” Kumar asked when Kalla next met with the Indrans. “We all *adore* Liessa. She has been a *really* busy woman. With our single men that is, and even some of our single women.”

The Indran looked as if he were fondly remembering a close encounter with her; likewise the other men. The women seemed to share a men-are-like-that expression, as if to belie the claim that some of their gender had shared Liessa’s favors.

“Not that she minds,” Kumar continued. “She has a healthy appetite, and when she first arrived there, she was surprised to learn how well-educated Indrans are in the sharing of pleasure. She said that we had been a great resource to her, a resource for arts she had never learned on Velor. And since then, she has been a great resource in recruiting promising engineering students for our Guild.”

Kalla wasn’t sure if she could or should believe this.

“It is even so,” the director said.

It all had to do with a book called the *Kama Sutra*, which dated back at least to the reign of the Gupta dynasty in Bharat. It was so well known that many Indrans had committed passages from it to heart, as Akshita proceeded to demonstrate,

“When a woman, having placed one of her feet on the foot of her lover, and the other on one of his thighs, passes one of her arms round his back, and the other on his

shoulders, makes slightly the sounds of singing and cooing, and wishes, as it were, to climb up him in order to have a kiss, it is called an embrace like the 'climbing of a tree.'”

There were several others like that, but Akshita had to admit that some of the advice in the *Kama Sutra* seemed impractical.

“A woman endowed with a good disposition, beauty and other winning qualities, and also versed in the above arts, obtains the name of a Ganika, or public woman of high quality, and receives a seat of honor in an assemblage of men,” she recited, adding, “I can’t imagine how any woman could have managed to achieve that status.”

Kalla was puzzled. “You said it was all about the art of love?”

“And it is. But it enumerates 64 arts in which a courtesan must be well-versed – everything from singing and dancing and playing musical instruments to sports and gymnastics, creating perfumes, flower arranging, making kaspara – what you call cotton – look like silk, composing prose and poetry, arithmetical games, swordplay and even the art of war. Of course, such a woman wasn’t expected to have any profession but pleasuring men – but you’d think that by the time she’d mastered all those ‘arts,’ she’d have been too old...”

“How many of the 64 arts have you mastered?”

“Well, I *am* good at sports, and I *have* to be good at mathematics. Luckily, our guilds haven’t needed their own militias for centuries, so we don’t study the art of war. Anyway, a lot of that had to do with the military use of gajas, which were about the size of your great oxen, only with noses like snakes and big ears. The Seeders didn’t bring any of them to Indra, which is probably just as well – it also encouraged us to develop other means of transport. As for science, there wasn’t any word for it in Sanskrit when

our ancestors were taken, and yet from what I've read Gupta culture was on the verge of it – they'd invented the numeric system that was called Arabic by your Romaioi, who knew nothing of its actual origin, and had pioneered some technology like machines for processing kaspara. Our people didn't bring that with them, but they brought the kind of *thinking* behind it.”

\* \* \*

Working with the Indrans turned out to be more complicated than Kalla had first imagined. She'd have to practice flying back and forth to Alkmene carrying containers that would be filled with compressed sun gas, and she'd have to learn how to spot the location where the Guild would set up its processing station.

Ascent and descent through the Androssian atmosphere during the work couldn't be rushed – she might be invulnerable but the containers weren't; if they overheated they could explode or at least spring leaks that would vent the gas.

One thing in her favor was that the containers were designed with loops through which Kalla could place her hands and feet – that had been Samudra's idea, although Patali was in charge of their construction – making them easier for her to carry. Weight was no problem; keeping her grip was something else.

“We know that you've already been using storage tanks for marsh gas,” Patali said. “It will be the same with sun gas. We'll supply a transfer pump, considerably more powerful than those you've been using, but we're depending on your people to have the tanks ready by the time we can begin shipments from Alkmene. We'll supply detailed specifications.”

Kalla nodded in understanding, but what really struck her was the reference to “your people.” She had devoted much of the time since the previous visit of the *Bountiful Voyager* to her work on the planetary history. There were hints that the original settlers here hadn’t all been strictly religious – that was reflected in the naming of the moons. But she’d have to be careful about how she covered those details in her history when it came to publication – and in displays at the historical museum she also had in mind. Natives of Andros didn’t necessarily regard her as one of their own.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile, there was a problem setting up communication between the palace and the Indran base on Alkmene. The most advanced long-range technology on Andros was still a network of signaling towers, from which fairly simple messages could be sent in code by waving flags of different colors. The messages could be passed from tower to tower by operators who could read them through long-viewing lenses. But even Kalla couldn’t read signals like that across the distances of space, and the same would be the case with the Indrans.

Shabam had foreseen the problem, and arranged for shipment of components of devices for what the Indrans called *sabdabuvai* (sowing words) to convey long distance messages. It was the same technology Kalla had known under another name on Velor. A sending station was set up at the palace, like that of the Indrans on the moon, and sending and receiving farcallers, powered by condensed lightning units, were issued.

“Do we need that many?” Kalla asked, when the trade captain delivered a dozen of the devices, only three earmarked for the Indrans. Chandra and Dhruva had been detailed to set up the base station, since that was their area of expertise.

“You may find other purposes for the rest,” Shabam said. “And it can’t hurt to have spares. One must always be prepared for contingencies. Although not quite the same contingencies as Liessa.”

With that she passed on a message from her fellow Companion; Kalla learned that she had been occupied in ways the Indrans hadn’t deigned to mention. It seemed that the Guild of Resource Engineers had loaned her out to the Guild of Air and Space Transport Engineers.

“They let me ride in their experimental ships,” Liessa’s letter explained. “That can be terribly dangerous for the Indrans, but not for me. They taught me how to keep track of what the instruments say, because sometimes farcallers don’t work – that happens a lot coming back into the atmosphere – and I trained hard to memorize them, and report back on the final readings if something went wrong. Just a couple of years ago a new cargo landing craft they were testing blew up – a real fireball. But what I remembered helped them figure out what went wrong.”

The cargo craft was for delivery of manufactured goods, to be produced in space from iron and other materials mined from meteors. It was a revolutionary development, even greater than the sun gas project for Andros, but Liessa hadn’t gone into any detail about it. Although she had a talent for helping the Air and Space Transport engineers deal with the hazards of research and development, she wasn’t terribly interested in the projects themselves, as opposed to her own immediate rewards...

“Anyway, I flew in to report in to their Guild,” she wrote. “My clothes were gone, and I was covered with soot, but the engineers were so excited they wanted to... I had to remind them that one of the things I wasn’t wearing was gold. So they debriefed me,

but after that, and once I'd gotten cleaned up, my own Guild said go ahead, so I did. Nonstop, for hours. And it's been like that with the Resource engineers from the start. Are you really happy with one man at a time? You might want to think about what to do with yourself once your indenture runs out. Did you ever imagine we'd still be young at our age? I never did, but who's complaining?"

Kalla herself had chosen to live as close to a normal human life as possible over the past several decades. People on Andros knew that she was superhuman, but few just *how* superhuman she was – or *could* be. It was nearly 100 years since the war against Festus, the Battle of Nesalonika and the subjection of Gregoras, and collective memory of her part in all that had faded.

During the reign of Jayar, she had kept a low profile; her rescue of Methodios had been witnessed only by a handful of high-born in the remote Northern Reach, and her work on the lightning power station only by the engineers and other technicians – some of those from the patriarch's family. Since then, she hadn't seen any reason to change her manner of living. But now...

Shabam had taken her aboard the *Bountiful Voyager*, shown her the components of the "small" space ship that would be assembled by the Guild Liessa worked for. She could see that it would be small only compared to the interstellar craft that carried it, and it seemed incredible that only six people could do the job. But do it they would.

The trade fair had concluded; arrangements for the sun gas project, including the groundside storage tank near the spaceport, had been approved and implemented by Methodios. Kalla watched as the *Bountiful Voyager* lifted off, carrying not only shinefur and other export goods, but the promise of yet another technological revolution.

That and Liessa's experience on Indra had got her to thinking, but not only about her options for romance once she was free of her indenture. She might indeed live for centuries more, and she meant to enjoy them. Yet she at the same time, she yearned for more challenges. *What can I do with that life?* she asked herself. *What should I do? What must I do?*

## 4. Signs and Portents

It felt good to be in space again, to feel the full light and heat of the naked sun against her naked body. She drank in its raw energy, converting it to orgone, and then used that resource to tap into the extra-dimensional field of raw orgone she would need for the labor to come.

She didn't have any trouble finding the small crater where the Indrans meant to set up shop. It was near the moon's north pole, and deep enough that the heat of the sun couldn't reach it. There was water ice in a nearby cave, which would serve the needs of the Indrans, and there might also be access to subsurface pockets of sun gas that would be easier to process than what could be taken from the thin atmosphere.

It was a bleak world, and the other moons were even bleaker – barren rock and no atmospheres to speak of. But they might be rich in other resources; perhaps one day Andros would have mines and factories there, like the Indrans in their home system. The few other major planets in the system probably wouldn't be any use; their gravity fields were too strong for mining to be economical, and their temperatures too hot or too cold to ever make them attractive for settlement.

She'd have to explore them, just the same. Some use might be found for them, after all. Now that she was fully empowered, moreover, she found herself reveling anew in her strength and invulnerability. Even before that, she knew, she wouldn't have had to worry about radiation, extreme temperatures, or poisonous atmospheres – whereas the Indrans – or future Androssians spacemen too, for that matter – would need to wear protective clothing or travel in heavily-armored vehicles, and still risk death in any number of terrible ways...

Kalla pushed that last thought aside, as she started back for Andros, vowing to share the joy born of her experience in space with the man she loved...

\* \* \*

“You've grown!” Methodios said with a laugh when she returned to Feodoropolis with her orgone-enhanced breasts.

She had made a slow descent, lest she become overheated, landed on the roof of the palace and made her way to his chambers without bothering to get dressed. He might make light of it, but she could tell he was hot – hot for her body, even before he doffed his robe to reveal his manhood at full attention.

He quickly handed her the gold necklace they kept by the bedside; she smiled at him as she donned it.

“You are more golden than gold,” he whispered, running his eyes up and down her naked glory. His hands followed his eyes, and she knew he delighted in the feel of her flesh – flawless, invulnerable, yet responsive to his touch. He couldn't get enough of her breasts, squeezing them with all his might, then kneeling and biting her engorged

nipples as she gasped in pleasure. Then he knelt further, burying his face between her legs, nibbling her love button, drinking her fragrant juices.

She had to suppress her screams, lest she awaken the entire palace. But now it was time for Methodios to lie down and take as much pleasure as he had given.

“Like Vendorian steel,” she cooed as she impaled herself on him and rode him in wild abandon. His manhood teased all the pleasure points of her Velorian innerness until she felt the Big One coming, gave him that special squeeze that let him *know* it was coming, that let them explode together....

They cuddled for a while afterwards, but Kalla could see that he was exhausted, however much he had been fulfilled, and let him drift off to sleep. This night had been a gift, and there couldn't be many more like it to come, even with the help of the elixir – and her pheromones. His days were numbered, he must see that every day when he looked in the mirror, as she saw it now: his hair gray, streaked with white, his face lined and careworn....

How did he feel about his mortality? How did any of the Terrans? It was a subject Kalla had always tried to avoid. People here had never shown her any outward signs of envy, yet how could they not feel it?

The closest Methodios had ever come to the issue was to confide in her that he wanted the future of his world to be in “safe hands.” And Pateria had entrusted her with protecting him and his family. She meant to live up to that trust.

She hoped that his sleep was a peaceful one, but he must be worried about the future, however much he tried not to show it.

It all came down to Kyros.

There was nothing Methodios could do about Kyros, so he had tried to convince himself, and her, that it didn't matter – at least, that it didn't matter that much.

But it did. Pateria had known that. The family knew it. Even Methodios knew it, deep down.

\* \* \*

It might have begun as an adventure, but it soon became a routine. When Kalla received her first message from the Indrans, she soared into the sky, her body heated to near-incandescence. But she would have to forego that pleasure on the return trip, and on future journeys to pick up a filled container and return an empty.

The containers themselves, fabricated aboard the *Bountiful Voyager*, were huge, and would have been unwieldy, even for her, without the hand and footholds, placed as closely as possible to their centers of gravity. She'd practiced handling one of them as soon as it had been delivered to the Indran base, along with the processing equipment and the habitat, by the departing Scalantrans. That practice paid off; she had brought the first container safely to ground next to the spaceport storage tank, and the sun gas crew there had taken care of the rest.

While Kalla was busy with the heavy lifting, Methodios had been working with the farcallers, loaning some to Dr. Hayama, who had taken Candida into his practice, as well as to family members and a few trusted others like the eparch of police.

Voice communication over land lines had yet to be brought to Andros, although the principle was known. There was too much else to do, maintaining and extending lightning power systems had first call on copper string; as yet, power stations and their

distribution systems were all local, and connecting them into a network was still a dream of the future...

Methodios' next-to-youngest daughter Justina, who took after Eusebia with her interest in lightning power, had scrounged enough string to set up an experimental farcaller system in the palace, but it was never more than a novelty, used a few times to send orders from the patriarchal chamber to the kitchen staff for food – hardly an advance over speaking tubes, or even the bell pulls of the old palace in Ethrata. Not only that, but the strings running up the stairs were ugly. Even Justina soon lost interest, like her sisters, she lived in the city with her husband, Isidorus Procopios, chief engineer of the wind vane power station.

The Indran farcallers didn't need any copper strings; in principle, they could be used to exchange messages with Gregoras across the sea. They could be set to limit particular calls to particular units; such messages were strictly private between the parties. And Kalla could keep in touch with Rulav at the Academy, even from the moon, using her own unit and the Indrans' signal tower there, to discuss the history and the museum on an ongoing basis.

It wasn't really a matter of the family connection that he was now Deacon; he had already been teaching biology at the Academy for a decade before he married Eusebia at the age of 35; it had been a late marriage for both of them. But he had shown a talent for organization, and when Kalla stepped down from the highest office herself to devote herself full time to her own projects, the faculty had found him the obvious choice.

A lot of her conversation was with Dr. Hayama, who had introduced immunization to Andros. He and Candida, who shared a home without formalizing their relationship as

a marriage, performed routine surgeries – such as repairing bones broken in steam carriage and highwheeler accidents. They also taught courses for rural practitioners of folk medicine, midwives, barbers and other traditional providers, taking care to enlighten them without condescending to them.

\* \* \*

Three years later, there was a death that caused the Patriarch grave concern – enough to call a family council. It was that of Diomedes Phokas, eparch of police for Feodoropolis.

Such councils, as opposed to merely social gatherings, were the business of only the Patriarch and his immediate family – in-laws were not invited. Yet Methodios had invited Kalla, and none gainsaid him. It soon became clear why.

Phokas had been killed in what appeared to be a traffic accident, hit by a steam highwheeler bringing produce to the city's main fresh food market. Neither the driver nor the transport company had been found at fault; a traffic officer at the scene swore that the eparch had ignored his signal not to cross the street.

It had been late at night, and there had been few other people in the vicinity. The thing was...

“He was on his way to see me,” Methodios said. “He called me that night.”

“*What?*” Kalla interrupted. “Could this have to do with...”

According to the rules, she was talking out of turn; Eusebia, as eldest daughter, was first responder. But she was like a member of the family now, as if she enjoyed the status Pateria had once held – and everyone here knew what she was talking about.

“So it would seem,” Methodios said. “Diomedes had told me the last time we had an official meeting that he’d been investigating something that might be a threat to the Patriarchy itself; he thought Kyros might be behind it. But he wanted to be sure, there were records he wanted to examine – after work, when nearly everyone else had gone home. Was there any way he could contact me in an emergency? And I couldn’t think of anything but...”

“Do you have any idea what this might have involved?” asked Eusebia, who as the eldest daughter had the family prerogative of first response.

“He didn’t say. Something criminal, obviously, and presumably related to one of Kyros’ business operations in the city; anything to do with his landed estates would be outside his jurisdiction. How that could threaten my office, I can’t imagine.”

“But he was working alone that night,” Candida pointed out. “Perhaps he feared someone among the factiones might be involved.”

“It would have to be someone high up,” Methodios said. “But what could one man do? The factiones are screened to ensure they don’t have any outside loyalties, and it would be difficult if not impossible for any significant number to get past that.”

Despite their name, Kalla knew, the factiones were not drawn from rival factions – political or otherwise – as was said to have been the case on Earth. They had begun as a volunteer town watch, but with the growth of Feodoropolis they had become a professional force, their ranks augmented by recruits from theme militias and private security forces in the countryside who had proven they knew how to keep the peace and deal with common criminals.

They were armed and trained for urban service by officers of the standing army, the tagmata, which was charged with dealing with national emergencies although there hadn't been any for ages. But they could advance their careers by studying criminal investigation as well.

Phokas had made it to the top through study and hard work, and he and his force had recently broken a case involving substandard highwheeler engines – it hadn't had to do with any of Kyros' enterprises.

Methodios had Dr. Hayama take charge of the body, but the doctor could say no more about the cause of death than the witnesses at the scene. "They told us the body hadn't been moved," Candida added. "The factiones were at the scene, and they said the same thing."

"I went to see his widow, Placidia," Dr. Hayama said. "But whatever he might have been worried about, he hadn't confided it to her. When I contacted Methodios, he directed that she be given permission to visit his office to look for 'personal effects,' but she found nothing that might bear on the case."

"Do you have any theory what this could be about?" Flavia asked her father.

"None. But the fact that he tried to conceal his investigation indicates that he not only must have suspected one of his officers, but that the officer in question might have somehow compromised the force – tampered with recruitment, perhaps."

"Perhaps we should have the tagmata intervene," Justina suggested. "If there is any question about the loyalty of the factiones...."

“But we can’t do that without making our suspicions public,” Methodios said. “And that would mean alerting the news sheets. The most I can do now is to insist that the next eparch be a man we can trust.”

“Indeed, we cannot take any chances with the news sheets,” agreed Petronia.

The family seemed to concur; at least, nobody raised any objections.

But Kalla was troubled in a way she had never been troubled before. She had dealt with enemies who could be seen. But the enemies Methodios and his family faced now were *unseen*, even if Kyros were ultimately behind them.

*Can they trust my promise any longer?* she wondered, a chill in her heart. *Can I still protect them?*

Her indenture would expire in only a little more than two Terran years, and as far as Velor might be concerned, that would be an end of any obligation to Methodios – let alone his family.

But Kalla had learned that there were obligations far greater than those of trade and commerce.

## 5. High and Low

The maiden voyage of the *Sky Climber* was to be, of course, from the capital to the Northern Reach. The Andros family had old connections there, and so did Kalla.

Yet the airship was not only the first of its kind, but might be the last. After having produced sun gas for the craft from Alkmene, Akshita and her fellow resource engineers had turned their attention to Andros itself – not for sun gas, but for the rock oil

that could be turned into chemical fuels for aircraft using lighter engines than steam power allowed, and fixed wings rather than gas for lift. They had discovered signs of a possible deposit on the eastern coast of the main continent.

If it proved out, airships might be obsolete, at least for passenger travel.

“I don’t imagine I’ll be around to see that,” Methodios said, as the ship neared the Western range. “But it’s good to have seen this.”

He paused for a moment.

“So how does it feel to be free at last?” he asked.

“No different than yesterday,” Kalla assured him.

All five of his daughters were aboard, and four of their spouses. Most of the grandchildren had been left behind, but Nestor was there and so, unexpectedly, was his younger brother Alexios, named for his uncle – who was only eight, but had begged and pleaded – “I want to be a flyer when I grow up,” he told them. And they finally gave in.

That made 13 in all, counting Kalla. Family members broke out in cheers, and broke open bottles of wine. The flight had been deliberately scheduled for the hundredth anniversary of her indenture. It was a double celebration. Nothing could spoil this day. And in a few more days, they would have dealt with Kyros, once and for all.

Nobody said a word about that, still less called for a triple celebration. Methodios and Kalla and the five daughters were the only ones here who knew. Security was that tight. There was such a thing as tempting fate...

\* \* \*

Photios Papanopoulos, Diomedes Phokas’ successor as eparch of police, had caught a break in his investigation of Phokas’ death. It had come, ironically, as a result

of a terrible accident at the steam car races. Half a dozen drivers had been killed, and three others were near death.

It wasn't the sort of thing that would ordinarily have called for the involvement of the eparch himself, but Papanopoulos had run into a dead end at headquarters. If Phokas had had any evidence against Kyros, it had been destroyed. Anything else the patriarch-in-waiting might be involved in, therefore, was fair game – as long as it took place within the bounds of Feodoropolis, which had recently been extended to embrace outlying residential and business areas – including the racetrack.

It was a dying steam car driver who had whispered to the eparch the secret of what Kyros was actually doing with the income from the races – and from the estates and business enterprises under his control.

Papagiannopoulos had told only Methodios and Kalla and the family.

“We can't risk anyone else finding out until the tagmata are ready to strike,” he said. “They'll be able to handle his rabble, and Kalla can deal with the highwheelers.”

It would seem to be a routine military parade, with the troops told only that they should expect trouble at the racetrack that day. Kyros planned to stage a riot there as a cover for his coup. But his recklessness would be his undoing. The eparch found that hard to fathom.

“If Kyros weren't set on acting prematurely, nothing could be done. Treason is only a matter of dates, but as long as the Patriarch lives, this is treason most foul. Once you take him by surprise, he'll be finished – and his sons, if they aren't involved and have any sense at all, will waive their rights in favor of Nestor.”

“I can't understand it,” Methodios said. “Perhaps fate is on our side.”

“Or stupidity,” theorized the eparch. “It’s hardly a secret that Kalla will be free of her indenture by then. The news sheets are full of it. Perhaps he believes she won’t interfere.”

“I’ve certainly never given any reason for him to believe that,” Kalla retorted. “Not that I’ve ever had words with him if I could possibly avoid it. And he’s never given any reason for anyone to believe that I’m anything but a poisonous ‘foreign’ influence. He’s even trying to poison people’s minds about Dr. Hayama and the Indrans.”

“Could he possibly know something we don’t?” asked Eusebia.

“I can’t imagine what,” said Papanopoulos.

Neither could anyone else at the family council. But the die had been cast, if not by any of them. It would all come to a head three days after their return from the flight of the *Sky Climber*.

But to prepare for any contingency, Kalla advised moving the base station for the farcallers to the estate of Symeon Choniates, husband of Flavia, outside the capital, and the council agreed. Portable senders for were assigned to Dr. Hayama at the hospital and Rulav at the Academy, but those could work only through relays surreptitiously placed at signal towers.

\* \* \*

Security was as tight for the flight as for the plans against the coup. Kamana Desai and her crew were groundside Indrans. Kalla herself had checked over the ship carefully for any signs of tampering, even though access had been severely restricted aground.

There was nothing to worry about, yet Methodios had his com unit to hand, and Kalla was prepared for any contingency. If there were a sudden emergency back at the capital, she could easily carry the Patriarch home to deal with it. She might even bear the *Sky Climber* itself to ground to save the family members aboard if there were any malfunction with the ship.

Having lifted off from the spaceport outside Feodoropolis, the ship headed north. Far below them the fields and forests were laid out like a patchwork quilt of green and gold, and the roads were like threads; the highwheelers that plied them were too tiny to make out.

The vistas were familiar to Kalla from many flights of her own on business or pleasure, but a revelation to Methodios and his family.



“There’s one of my marsh gas plants,” said Flavia, pointing to a barely visible spot next to one of the marshes at the fringe of the cultivated land of the Teos theme. “You can see it even from up here.”

“It’s a good thing we can’t smell it from up here,” remarked Candida, who was used to worse smells in the course of her career as a physician – which included work on cadavers. What her partner Dr. Hayama might have thought went unsaid; he had begged off the flight to tend to his work and, in any case, had a fear of heights.

Although the themes were still military as well as civil divisions, commanded by a strategoi and with lesser ranks serving under him, their original purpose had become all but obsolete after the last war under Feodor. The militia was now more like a police and emergency force, and civil matters such as the upkeep of roads and the purchase of farming equipment and other technology, the extension of lightning power systems and the like were the primary concerns of the commanders. The kentarchs in charge of the neighborhood militia units served as judges in civil and criminal trials, and assembled as a group for cases involving more than one neighborhood or the entire theme.

It was a patchwork system, much like the division of individual farmsteads that grew in number as the population grew, as new lands were cleared for cultivation further and further from the center. The once-soldier farmers had a strong sense of solidarity and mutual aid – getting a new farm cleared and plowed for a new family had become a social occasion. It was nothing like the hereditary great estates, where the farmers were only employees, or the lesser estates, where those who were not first-born struck out on their own in new lands – with more or less success.

Symeon Choniates held one of the lesser estates, but it was an unusual one – and not just because it was so close to the capital. His older brother, Athanasios was to inherit the family’s great estate, but their father Constans favored his junior son with a grant of a stretch of land that was mostly forest.

The forest had been left untouched, a matter of family tradition. But the grant also contained a scenic lake that had been used for boating. It still was, but it was also used for farming – farming fish. It had been Flavia’s idea, and she had developed the feed that kept the fish growing. Because the pond was fed by a fast-flowing stream, effluent was carried away, and the water was kept as fresh as the fish themselves.

*Fresh* fish. That was the whole idea. People had long caught fish to feed their own families. But the commercial trade inland had always been in salted fish from the distant coast. Not quite as distant as in the days before steam carriages, but still far enough off to preclude safe transport of fresh seafood. From his lesser estate, however, Symeon could supply the merchants in the capital that already sold fresh produce, and also restaurants that created fancy recipes from them. It wasn’t enough to make a *great* fortune, even with frequent harvests. But he couldn’t complain.

And nobody aboard the *Sky Climber* could complain when he treated them to a fish luncheon. He and Flavia did all the work, from gutting and cutting and seasoning to cooking on a lightning power stove.

“We don’t have anything like this here,” Symeon said of the stove. “But we will. The Indrans can help with that, too.”

“Indeed,” agreed Eusebia. “And with a good deal more, I’ll warrant.”

The fish itself was nothing new; straight from the family pond, and everyone had had it before. But this time there was something extra – the spices.

“Panchphoron,” Symeon explained, as an aroma they had never known before arose from the stove. “The Indrans brought some – on condition that I make enough to treat them too.”

Nestor was deputized to take a couple of servings to the control room, while the chef offered portions to the Patriarch and Kalla and the rest of the family.

“Nothing like himmas,” Methodios remarked after taking the first bite. “Not that there’s anything wrong with himmas,” he added, after seeing the mock frown on Kalla’s face. After all, it was she who had introduced himmas to Andros – generations ago.

But it was all in fun, and it was all good eating and good conversation as the airship approached the Western range. The *Sky Climber* offered a spectacular view of the white-capped peaks. Most remained in the passenger cabin; it was chilly on the deck. But Nestor, with the daring of a 17-year old, actually took a seat outside.

“You should bring us some of that ice,” Symeon kidded Kalla. “That would help with the business.”

“It’s mostly snow,” Nestor responded, half seriously. “She couldn’t just carry it in her arms.”

“And why should she?” Methodios added. “She’s no longer beholden to me.”

Everybody laughed at that, including the Patriarch himself.

And then it happened. Of a sudden, he looked distressed.

“I think... the air... too thin...”

Kalla felt a stab of terror. The air might be thin, but not *that* thin.

“I’ve got to get you to Tofky,” she said, reaching out for him. “This is serious.”

But it was too late.

“I guess I’m... obsolete,” he struggled to say, forcing a smile.

He died in Kalla’s arms a moment later.

It was so sudden that the others were shocked into silence. But after a moment there were wails of grief. Nestor, who hadn’t heard anything before over the sound of the engine, raced back to the cabin and added his tears to those that already flowed in abundance.

Only Kalla had the presence of mind to order the Indrans to put the airship on course back to Feodoropolis. It would be small comfort to her to learn that there was nothing she could have anticipated, or done. Dr. Hayama’s examination found that the sudden blockage in the artery leading to the heart had led to the attack.

“Even if we had machines to see inside the body, we would probably not have caught any warning signs,” he told her. “At least, he didn’t suffer much.”

But the world he left behind would suffer greatly, suffer as it never had before. In the three years to come, tears and blood alike would flow in abundance.

## **Part Three: Kyros Tromeros**

### **1. Reign and Ruin**

“This is an outrage!” Rulav shouted. “Never before has a Patriarch been denied a state funeral.”

It was two nights after Methodios' death aboard the *Sky Climber*, and Kyros had wasted no time declaring himself Patriarch. But when the head of the family sought an audience, he had been refused entrance to the palace, and dismissed by a member of the staff with word that he would have to make funeral arrangements elsewhere.

Kalla hadn't witnessed that; she had thought it discreet not to get involved in such matters now that she was no longer indentured. But she shared Rulav's anger, knowing that it was only by chance that Kyros didn't need to carry out his plan for a coup against the man she had loved and served faithfully.

"He has added insult to injury, sending an underling to inform me," Rulav raged. "And the same underling gave me to understand that we would not even be invited to his coronation. Not that I would wish to honor him with my presence in any case. I am sure it will be the same with the rest of the family."

It was twice an insult to Rulav himself, for as Deacon of the Academy he was entitled to a place of honor at official functions. Even if he had not been Deacon, his wife Eusebia was the eldest daughter of Methodios, and that should have earned him a place. But the family connection had nothing to do with his appointment; he had already proved his administrative skills as head of the faculty of biology, and had already been known for his theoretical work.

Rulav had summoned Kalla to his office at the Academy that evening to break the news to her, even before breaking it to the family. As the father of Nestor, the eldest grandson, it was incumbent on him to look after the family's interests and offer his best guidance in its decisions.

“It will be hard on them,” he said now. “But my first duty is to them, and not to the Academy. I wonder if I will even be allowed to retain my position here. But it can all wait until the morning; let the others sleep in peace tonight.”

There came a call on Rulav’s com, and he reached to answer. But it wasn’t from a member of the family, nor the Indrans. It was Eparch Papagiannopoulos, the man who had uncovered the plot by Kyros to stage a coup against Methodios without waiting to take power as a matter of right.

“They *know* that we knew,” he said. “And now they want me to tell the world that it was *your* plot to murder Kyros, rather than his to assassinate Methodios. They have their means... means I can’t resist. Only one way out. Beware.”

The com fell silent.

Kalla took it upon herself to investigate.

“I can get there faster than anyone else,” she said.

Papagiannopoulos would have called from home, she knew; that was where he kept his com and his most sensitive papers. It was a quick flight, and she would not be noticed in the darkness.

She found him sprawled dead at his desk, having put a spitter pellet through his head. He must have shot himself after using his weapon on the com; that lay shattered on the floor. In his fireplace were fresh ashes, presumably records of his investigations into Kyros’ activities. Shooting the farcaller had been his next to last act, assuring that the family’s communications would remain secure. But Kalla disposed of the pieces, lest they arouse curiosity.

\* \* \*

Rulav called the family together at Symeon's estate the next morning, and they agreed to hold a private memorial service. The groundside Indrans had kept the body on ice at their compound – expecting that it would be taken from there to the capital for embalming.

“I don't expect that the palace embalmers would be cooperative,” Rulav told the others. “We cannot allow ourselves to suffer another indignity. Let us mourn our loss as befits us, and honor Methodios as befits him. So say you all?”

“So say we all,” the rest chanted. It was an ancient ritual among other high-born families assenting to collective decisions at their gatherings, but it had only been with Methodios that the Andros family had embraced it.

Symeon, of course, was delegated to take word to the estate's household staff and workers at the fish farm, who were invited to attend the service – and to prepare a ceremonial meal for afterwards. There were traditional preparations to be made. Rulav himself returned to the city to obtain a funeral shroud. He also bought kollyba – funeral cakes of boiled wheat, fruits and nuts – from a bakery near the Academy.

He returned looking graver than before, but the rest took it for granted that their loss and subsequent indignities were simply weighing on him more.

Rulav prevailed on Kalla to dig the grave, simply because she could perform that task quicker and more easily than estate workers with spades, although spades would be needed later. She was also the obvious choice to retrieve Methodios' remains, flying to the Indran compound with the shroud and returning with it filled. The Patriarch's daughters and sons-in law had already seen him in death, aboard the *Sky Climber*, and did not wish to repeat the experience, nor to inflict it on the younger children.

Constans Choniates, lord of the great estate, and his older son Athanasios and his family, had been invited to join Symeon and the rest at the lesser estate. But it was Rulav who led the procession to the grave site near the fish pond, he and the other in-laws carrying the shrouded body to its final resting place.

They lowered it carefully into the grave Kalla had dug by hand. There was only a brief eulogy by Rulav; all present had known more about Methodios than he could put into words, however eloquent. His daughters joined their mates to shovel in the dirt.

That was followed by a fish dinner at the homestead, and the sharing of *kollyba* – the children appreciated the gesture, even if they didn't understand its significance. For that matter, none here believed in its Christian meaning – analogous to sharing of bread at communion. It was a matter of honoring the dead, and promising to remember them.

When they were done, Rulav dismissed the children. Constans and his family bade farewell, and Kalla too would have withdrawn, but Rulav signaled her to remain. The reason became clear when he confided something he had held secret. A letter that had been sent to his office by Kyros himself. Dismay spread quickly among the others as he read it:

*“Your traitorous schemes are known to us, and it is only out of our mercy that you have escaped retribution. We shall continue to show mercy if you show proper respect and obedience to your rightful Patriarch. You have no alternative, now that you shall no longer enjoy the protection of the alien whore who seduced and connived with Feodor and Jayar and Methodios and turned them from the true faith and true path. Consider this our last warning. So swears Kyros, by God’s grace True Lord and Patriarch.”*

“Has he truly lost his mind?” asked Symeon.

“More to the point, we must assume that he means to threaten all of us, even if this message was addressed only to me. Mad or not, he knows that we conduct family business in the traditional manner, even if we give women a voice that would be denied them elsewhere. And it is the women here who are the only blood heirs to Methodios. We should hear their counsel.”

“He mistakes the intentions of Kalla,” Eusebia said; her age would have given her precedence even if she had not been the wife of Rulav and mother of Nestor. “Surely that is to our advantage.”

Rulav turned to Kalla. “It would seem that we also have need of your counsel,” he said.

“I wish I could be with you, with *all* of you,” she said. “But I cannot be with all of you at the same time, as things stand.”

“You believe, then, that it would be safer for us to remain here?”

“Out of sight, perhaps out of mind. It might be better if I too were out of sight.”

“Must we really hide ourselves from the rest of the world?” asked Candida. “Give up our work, all we have lived for, all we have loved?”

“It may be only for a time,” Rulav suggested.

“I just *can't*,” said Dr. Hayama.

All eyes turned to him. Having never actually married Candida, he shouldn't have had a place here. Yet, like Kalla, he was irreplaceable.

“Tofky—“ said Candida.

“I'm sorry,” he said, pain on his face. “It has to be. I would have told you before if I'd known.” Then he turned to the others to explain himself.

“Physicians have a special duty. Mine is to the hospital and its work. Candida and I don’t have any children, so I don’t face that kind of obligation. And I can still visit her here, if I’m careful not to be seen coming or going.”

“I have to accept that,” Candida said after a long silence. “I wish that I could work with you, but if I placed myself in danger I might be placing all the rest of us in danger.” She paused for a moment. “And I’ve learned enough about the practice of medicine to deal with any common ailments or injuries you might suffer.”

Others then offered their thoughts.

“My technicians at the Power Authority can manage without me in most matters, and reach me here if necessary in others,” ventured Isidorus. “Can we at least maintain contact with the Indrans? Justina has been working with them on farcallers. We may need them in times to come.”

“We have farcall contact with them already,” Kalla pointed out. “I take it that you mean visiting back and forth, as well as keeping in touch by farcall?”

“It would help,” said Justina.

“I could serve as a go-between.”

“Perhaps,” Justina said – but not happily.

“I suppose I’ll have to join Rulav, exiling myself from the Academy,” Alexios said bitterly. “At least I can work on my treatise about particles. But I’m not going to have any peace from my son, I’m afraid. He may hold his silence now, but I know him – he’ll be after me about when we can take another trip with the *Sky Climber* – all the way to the Northern Reach this time, I’ll warrant.”

Symeon would still have his fish business, which he ran from the estate. “But will Kyros leave us free to market our products in the capital or elsewhere?” he wondered. “It would appear that our welfare, and even our survival, may depend on that.”

“I’ve had enough of marsh gas,” Flavia volunteered. “Anyway, there’s plenty of work at the fish farm now to keep me busy. But we may have to see to producing all our own feed – perhaps Constans can help, if it comes to that.”

As for Rulav himself, he observed that he might be able to pursue biology research here at the lesser estate, but it wouldn’t be possible to carry out controlled experiments at the fish pond. Eusebia, meanwhile, wouldn’t be able to visit any of the power stations her work had made possible. She seemed more depressed than any of the others, even Candida.

“We are all internal exiles here,” she said.

\* \* \*

Dr. Hayama visited from time to time over the next year and a half. Nobody ever pressed him for news; that they could get from the merchants and others that the family had dealings with in the city.

Early on Kyros had called for new taxes from the merchants, supposedly to pay for inspections by the factiones – although nothing of the sort had been authorized, let alone carried out. A number of merchants met at the public square near the palace to protest, only to be set upon by a crowd of thugs who suddenly and inexplicably arrived from the steam car race track. Some of the merchants were severely beaten, and one later died from his injuries. The factiones, with no one to lead them – but knowing how things stood under Kyros – didn’t interfere.

Neither did Kalla. She had tried to keep a low profile, but Kyros wouldn't let her – or at least his pet bishop Pertinax wouldn't. Too advanced in years for her to be of use to him even if she *had* been a whore, he had used his position in the Synod to insinuate that she was servicing the entire family. The news sheets ate it up, and Rulav and the others winced at the unwanted publicity.

“There's only one way to deal with this,” Kalla said. “Take them at their word.”

She began to be seen in the capital again, playing at being on the prowl for new lovers after having tired of the family. She even became a fixture at the Academy where she had once served chastely as Deacon, brazenly approaching young students and their professors alike.

None of those she targeted were married, or involved in steady relationships, but that went unnoticed by the authorities. So did the fact that not all of them were obvious studly types; indeed, most were intellectual in temperament, and some even shy with women. During her indenture, she had been the stuff of their wildest fantasies, yet none would have dared talk about it, let alone come on to her – she *belonged* only to the Patriarch himself. Only now, *she* was coming on to *them*.

Kalla had known how to pleasure herself when the Patriarchs were no longer up to it, but had always done so discreetly – out of sight and out of hearing of the family, or anyone else. But now she was free to share her body with anyone she chose, as she had with the men of her homeworld so many years ago, and with her shipmates during the journey to Andros. It didn't take long for her to become notorious. And while her approaches were never scheduled in advance, they no longer surprised their recipients.

Ioannes Laskaris, a promising young professor of literature, was among them. When he answered a knock at his door one night, his eyes lit up at the sight of the living goddess, and his cock sprang to attention almost immediately.

Kalla didn't waste any time getting naked, and neither did Ioannes. She saw that he also didn't make any move to dim the lights – everybody knew that she wanted to see and be seen. But it was too much for him; as she moved to embrace him, he came on her belly and his face turned red with embarrassment.

Shaming him, however, was the last thing on her mind.

"Mmmm," she half-whispered as she gathered some of his cum on her fingers and, raising her hand, licked it off. "May I have some more?"

Kalla knelt before him and took him in her mouth, her century of experience with the patriarchs of Andros put to good use. Embarrassment for Ioannes turned to joy; he grew hard again, and stayed hard as she teased him with her lips and tongue – just enough but not too much, until she finally let him come.

His face was filled with wonder, beyond the joy of his release.

"Turnabout is fair play," she suggested. "I've got something between my legs and it's so tasty."

Ioannes didn't hesitate for a moment, but dove in – licking and nibbling her clit and drinking her fragrant juices. It was his first experience, she knew, with the flavor and aroma of a Velorian, like nothing else in the universe – and he was crazy for it. He had a talented tongue, too; had somebody seen to his education, or was it instinct? Whatever, he had her bucking and moaning with pleasure until she came.

Kalla took a break then, but only long enough to retrieve a gift from the deep-pocketed stola she had worn when she arrived here.



It was an erotic print from Fujiwakoku, copied from a pillow book published there and given her years earlier by the Scalantans; she had previously shared it only with Methodios.

“It’s called shunga,” she explained. “They have entire books devoted to the art of love, much like the *Kama Sutra* of Indra, only more lavishly illustrated. Would you like to try out what *they’re* doing?”

“It doesn’t look as if we *could*,” Ioannes said doubtfully. “Her... it’s in the wrong place.”

Kalla burst out laughing.

“That’s on purpose,” she explained. “Shunga originated on the world the Fujiwajin came from for instructional purposes, for the education of courtesans. Those new to the profession had to see what they and their lovers were supposed to be doing.”

“It still looks awkward, but if you say...”

“Trust me, the people who devised pillow books didn’t demand the impossible.”

She gave him a broad smile, then struck a provocative pose.

“Unlike that Fujiwajin woman, I’m not hairy down there,” she said, and smiled at him again. “But there’s more than you can see... inside. We Velorian women are just *lined* with pleasure points. All it takes to set them off is the feel of a loving man stroking them...”

She knew that would appeal to his ego as well as his lust, and now he couldn’t resist her invitation.

It took some agility for them to position themselves, but they were soon taking delight in the intimacy of hugging and kissing even as Kalla impaled herself on him and ground against his cock, reveling in the awareness that he could feel her spasms as she came again and again, that she could feel him explode inside her. Kisses soon turned to screams and moans for both of them...

“You’ve taken me to Heaven,” he murmured in the afterglow.

“It’s been heavenly for me, too,” she said. “And I believe it will be heavenly for the woman you marry. Maybe by then, I could bring you an entire pillow book as a wedding gift for you to share with her. Dr. Hayama could translate the text, if need be.”

“I doubt that sort of thing would be welcomed... things being as they are.”

The veiled reference to Kyros was the only sad note of the evening, and yet it was inescapable, even as she had turned the conversation to other aspects of Fujiwajin culture, from the elaborate forms of courtly dress to the novels written by the *murasakis* – whose ranks, it amused him to be told, her fellow companion Jaleel had joined with some difficulty.

“This is *fascinating*,” Ioannes said. “I’d love to learn more about the other worlds  
And to teach about them.”

“Someday, perhaps, you’ll have the chance to learn from the Fujawin themselves  
– and the people of other worlds the Scalantrans trade with.”

“If only.”

Before they exchanged final kisses and parted, Ioannes opened a bottle of wine  
and filled two glasses.

“To things being better than they are,” he said as they took sips.

“Perhaps men like you could one day make them so,” Kalla responded.

*And perhaps he shall*, she thought. *He and the others...*

She couldn’t just let the future happen. She had to prepare the way for it – if she  
could. She owed that to the memory of Methodios as well as the family she had sworn  
to protect.

\* \* \*

Things didn’t get better. Kalla couldn’t avoid seeing that, and it scared her – only  
heroic self-discipline stayed her from speaking out or, worse, taking any action. Her first  
duty was still to the family. Symeon already had it hard enough with the new taxes and  
other impediments to his business, yet he had kept silent.

The same sort of steam car fanatics who had attacked the merchants were soon  
recruited into the ranks of the factiones, and dozens of steam cars adapted as official  
police vehicles – armed with fast-loading spitters, a type of weapon previously limited to  
the tagmata. Kyros already had command of the standing army, but word was that the  
weapons had actually been produced at secret factories on some of his allies’ estates.

Rumor also had it that he might contrive to reward those allies by pressuring other estates to sell out to them.

That made Symeon nervous. It made his father Constans, a member of the Great Synod, even more nervous. But during the first year of his reign, Kyros had focused on making his authority felt in the urban centers, augmenting the tagmata with his loyalists and establishing garrisons in provincial capitals. All that was within his prerogative as the Patriarch, even if Methodios had never exercised that prerogative.

Kalla was certain there was worse to come, and planned accordingly in furtive visits to the estate and the Indran compound. There would be no safety for the family if the mad Patriarch moved against the estate. She could easily destroy the new police vehicles; if she wanted to show off, she could let them fire away at her invulnerable body. She could slaughter the Patriarchal forces wholesale – but, like the heads of the legendary hydra, more would appear. And her heart and stomach weren't into that.

Things finally came to a head the day that Kyros formally announced his plans for consolidation of the great estates – with compensation, to be determined later, for those about to be absorbed. The Great Synod, which hadn't deigned to challenge the Patriarch's previous edicts, went into extraordinary session, at which an overwhelming majority condemned the move as contrary to law and custom.

Constans Choniates, although his own estate wasn't immediately affected, took the lead in drafting the resolution, and was delegated to deliver it personally to Kyros. To his consternation, an aide later reported, the Patriarch tore it up and had Constans arrested on the spot and charged with treason. On orders from the palace, the factions invaded the hall of the Synod and declared the legislative body dissolved. Its members

were escorted out at gunpoint, and any who objected were beaten. A few who refused to leave were shot down.

Even Kalla hadn't expected Kyros to go that far, or she might have tried to rescue Constans, even if it meant exposing her true loyalty. But she had been with the Indrans, going over the contingency plan, when word reached her that he had been executed. She quickly flew to Symeon's estate. Athanasios, on learning of his father's death, had hurried there to bring the terrible news. Rulav had called a family council to hear him out and, as Kalla arrived, she could see that the heir to the great estate was terrified.

The setting belied the gravity of the occasion. There was a bright fire going in the common room that evening, but it was for comfort rather than illumination – they were still connected to the Feodorpolis lightning power system. Historical mosaics decorated the walls, the seats were comfortable, and the servants brought refreshments to the table. But it was indeed a grave occasion, the gravest they had ever faced, and limited to family members of age... and Kalla. All the younger children had been sent to bed, and the servants dismissed.

Athanasios' voice was filled with rage as well as terror.

"We *must* kill him," he said. "Kill him now, before he murders all of us."

"How are we supposed to accomplish that?" Rulav asked.

"Can you really pretend you don't know? Kalla can get to him no matter how well defended he is. Get to him and put an end to him."

Kalla had kept her silence, but all eyes turned to her now.

"Should I also put an end to Basil and Leo?" she ventured.

“The fruit of an evil tree,” Athanasios declared. “Let the tree be cut down and its fruit crushed.”

Rulav was troubled by that, despite his fear for his family.

“Are we ourselves to become assassins like Kyros? I fear the world will not forget that, nor allow us to forget, and Nestor will be remembered as a usurper. Perhaps he in turn—“

“We will have nothing to do with it,” Athanasios interrupted. “Kalla will shoulder the blame.”

“Nobody will believe that you had nothing to do with it,” Kalla countered. “But in any case, none of you can order me to do it. Would you have me murder Kyros’ children as well as him, for the sake of Nestor? Would Nestor himself?”

Now all eyes turned to Rulav’s son, the only grandchild of Methodios admitted to the proceedings.

“I would not,” he said, his own voice calm where others’ had been anything but. “I have never expected to become Patriarch, and I don’t expect to now. Sons don’t always take after their fathers, and we can’t yet take the measure of Basil and Leo. We can only wait, and hope.”

“Well said,” Rulav responded.

“But we *can’t* wait,” protested Athanasios. “We’re trapped here like rats.”

“Only, we can *think* better than rats,” said Rulav. “We *have* been thinking better. We knew at the outset that it might come to this. Kalla and I have a plan. For now. At least until the next visit of the Scalantrans. But you must swear not to tell anyone.”

“It seems that I must put my life, and their lives, in your hands,” Athanasios said, a tremor still in his voice. “I have no other choice. I swear.”

“We plan to flee to Gregoras in the *Sky Climber*,” Rulav told him. “We’re working out the details. I think you can understand that the less you know, the better.”

“I understand,” Athanasios said. “I cannot say that I approve. I do not wish to be further involved.”

With that, he made his departure, and Rulav could discuss the actual plan.

“We won’t be safe from Kyros until we’re dead – so that’s what we’ll be.”

## 2. Deep Cover

“We must not only be dead to the world, but act as if the world is dead to us,” his father told them once they had gathered at the Indran compound, ready to board the *Sky Climber* for its final journey.

Nestor and the rest had heard it before, but Rulav had put it more harshly now. And at this moment it bore repeating. All of them – those of an age to understand at any rate – must *feel* as well as know the reality of what they were facing. There could be no turning back; although they had come by stealth, taking back trails, the departure of the airship could not be concealed.

Questions would be asked, alarms might even be raised. The questions would be answered, and the answers believed – the evidence would be incontrovertible. But they had to make a clean getaway first. They boarded hurriedly, carrying nothing with them, but dressed warmly and plainly. They knew the reasons for that, and much else; except for Athanasios and his family, they had gone over every detail of the plan repeatedly.

“We have been internal exiles,” his mother said bitterly as they settled in. “Now we shall be truly exiles. How long can we endure this?”

“As long as it takes,” Nestor replied, trying to steel her courage – as if he didn’t need to steel his own.

And then the *Sky Climber* lifted off. It was mid-afternoon, on Lord’s Day, which they didn’t observe but was a godsend to them. The younger children, even Alexios, seemed to take their flight as an adventure. But how would they take months or even years of exile?

And their ultimate destination – only Kalla and Petronia among them had ever been there, although it had once been the capital of their world. Only Kalla could bring them there, and Nestor was scared silly. He would be the first to trust his life to her arms.

He understood why; he was the oldest grandson of Methodios. Did that mean his father might change his mind about doing away with Kyros’ family, in order that he might become Patriarch? He was afraid to ask. He also understood the need for clothing that was plain as well as warm; they hoped to be taken for farm laborers on holiday if they were spotted, and though it was high summer, the upper air overnight would be chilly, and Kalla would have to make good speed as she bore him and the others through it.

“You don’t have to worry, I won’t drop you,” she told Nestor. “I flew Feodor all the way from Ethrata to Nesalonika. You know about that.”

Nestor knew, but that didn’t help. Her flight with Feodor had been a long time ago. Wouldn’t even a Velorian have to keep in practice for that sort of thing? As the *Sky Climber* headed west to the ocean, he shivered even though it wasn’t cold in the cabin.

Kalla had told them that she would denounce them all as deserters and spread the cover story that they had set out for Gregoras – believing that the one-time rivals of the Andros family would welcome them. “People back home will think that’s a desperate gamble, unlikely to succeed even if you reach your destination. But you won’t.”

The stretch of beach where the Indran pilot set down was as isolated as could be found; a long cliff overhung it, and there wasn’t even a fishing village anywhere near. No fishing boats were visible at sea, and if any had been, they couldn’t have reported in to the government – assuming they were inclined to – in time to frustrate the escape.

Dusk soon fell, and nobody could have spotted them any longer. The time had come.

“Trust me,” Kalla said as she approached him, then asked him to turn around and took him in her arms from behind.

Nestor tried to keep his eyes closed during most of the flight, but found it hard not to look. Not that there was much to see; Alkmene was in dark phase, and the small inner moons offered only dim impressions of ocean waves, then fields and forests. Yet even those dim impressions were enough to make him dizzy, and then nauseous. His only consolation was that he didn’t vomit on Kalla – and he suddenly realized *that* might be why she was carrying him from behind.

It seemed to take forever, but at last they landed on the roof of Ethrata Keep, where Nestor collapsed in a heap the moment Kalla released him. As she bade him farewell, he felt himself being picked up again – this time by a man who must be a member of the catapan’s household staff. The man helped him into the Keep, and then into a room, and then into a waiting bed. The rest was sleep.

By the time he woke, half the family had made it – the younger children in carryalls supplied by the Indrans, two or three at a time, after being given sleeping drafts carefully measured by Candida. Only now the others were sleeping, except for Alexis – who, perhaps alone among them, seemed to have truly enjoyed the journey. The rest would have to await their turn tonight, hiding out by day.

Early the next evening, the Indran pilot set the *Sky Climber* so that it would crash well out to sea. Just before it went out of control, Kalla scooped her up and carried her to the Keep.

Kalla's arms never tired, for any of them – including those who spent anxious hours that second night on a lonely beach waiting their turns, fearing they might yet be discovered, that Kyros' men might see through the ruse. But Kalla had planned well; wreckage from the airship came ashore at several points along the coast during the next few weeks. Other parts were discovered at sea by fishermen.

\* \* \*

Nobody beyond Ethrata knew where they were, but even in Ethrata they were confined to the Keep. Exaugustus Boioannes, the catapan there had, at Kalla's advice, been among the first to declare fealty to the new regime. That had removed him from suspicion – no attempt had been made to replace him, and it wasn't likely that anyone from the capital would come snooping around.

But it didn't make daily life any better for the family. Ethrata was a refuge, but it might as well be a prison. They had to look and act like household staff, dressing plainly and living plainly and doing nothing to call attention to themselves. They could not set foot outside the Keep, nor venture to the battlements or roof except in the dark of night.

Kalla had brought Rulav's sender to the old palace, and placed relays between Ethrata and Feodoropolis. But they could not contact Kalla save in dire emergency, nor she them – and none could have any contact with Dr. Hayama, who had remained in the capital to work at the hospital. He had been excluded from the details of their plan, even after Candida made her tearful farewell. The less he knew the better, even though they trusted him to say nothing and grieve for what all who knew him at work would believe to be his loss.

But as much as the family exiles suffered, it was even worse for Kamana Desai, the Indran pilot who had supposedly gone down with the airship. Like the others, she had never been borne through the air before, and shook like a leaf the whole way. She admitted she had found that embarrassing – but she got over that. What she couldn't get over was the way she was treated.

The rest of them could fit in as Androssians; she could not. She ventured from her quarters below stairs only after hours, when the household staff people were in bed. Boioannes trusted them not to talk about the Andros family members he was sheltering when they went into town, but knowing about the Indran might be a different matter. *Might* be. He couldn't take any chances.

Nestor, who found his own exile life boring beyond belief, sympathized with her plight, and tried to be of help, undertaking to study Indran with her, although she was perfectly comfortable with deeptaught Romaic. She couldn't seem to believe her ears at first, but she warmed to the idea when he made it plain that he was serious.

It started with her given and family names.

“They mean ‘wish’ and ‘landlord,’” she explained. “But I have never had any wish to be a landlord. I wanted only to be a pilot with the Guild of Air and Space Transport Engineers.”

“Alexios wants to be a pilot, too,” Nestor said. “He’s really obsessed with it.”

“Only, there aren’t any aircraft left to pilot on Andros,” she observed. “Let alone spacecraft.”

She had a lot to say about spacecraft, or antariksha yana as they were known on Indra – one of the few seeded worlds to develop space flight capability on its own. She was intensely proud of that, proud of the history of her world, from the seeding to recent times.

But while they were friends from the start, it took Nestor some weeks appreciate her need – her aching need – for closer company. She was cut off from her fellow Guild members here on Andros now, and not just professionally. One evening, during what was supposed to be a study session about the height of the Gupta Empire and its art architecture and literature, she made her purpose clear by reciting and translating a passage that she had somehow managed to memorize from a book called the *Kama Sutra*:

“When the legs of both the male and the female are stretched straight out over each other, it is called the ‘clasping position,’” she intoned. “It is of two kinds, the side position and the supine position. In the side position the male should lie on his left side, the woman on her right side.”

Kamana smiled at him, and began to remove her sari and undergarments. In a few moments, she lay down on her bed before him on her right side, completely naked

– facing him and looking him straight in the eye. Her invitation was obvious, but she gave voice to it just the same.

“Lie with me,” she whispered.



Nestor’s heart was suddenly filled with joy.

Yet unwed, he too had been aching for intimate company – but had felt ashamed to complain about it, given the circumstances. He was far from being a virgin, as she might have believed, having chosen to start with the most basic of positions, and he soon proved otherwise. Kamana was delighted that he knew where to begin, and eager to move on from there, into territory he hadn’t dreamt of. And as she taught him all the myriad ways to bring pleasure to her, and himself, he felt *good* about being a man.

There wasn’t anything else to feel good about.

He would never be Patriarch, now that Kyros' eldest son was presumptive heir. He might not live to see how Basil would turn out, if Kyros found their refuge. Perhaps Kalla would have to arrange with the Scalantans to spirit him and the rest of the family off planet. It would be a cowardly way out, but there might be no other choice.

Where would they go? Indra, perhaps?

### **3. Bad Medicine**

*So this is what it means to feel utterly helpless,* Kalla thought.

People were going to *die*, and there was nothing she could do about it – short of killing Kyros himself. Only that might make things even worse. She knew next to nothing of young Basil, but she could be sure of one thing: he and his children to come would hate her – and take out that hatred against anyone dear to her – if she took the law into her own hands.

She would be breaking cover if she did so, and betraying her word to Nestor and the family as well as the law...

The official version of the arrests had been spread quickly through the capital by news sheets, all now beholden to the government. There had even been a supposedly “spontaneous” demonstration in front of the palace, denouncing Doctor Hayama and his staff and all “foreign” influences.

Candida was bound to learn soon enough, even though Kalla didn't contact her by farcaller – that was too risky. She could only hope that the others at Ethrata would dissuade her, by force if necessary, from breaking cover to come to the defense of her

lover and the others who now stood accused of murder and treason for having aborted the late-term daughter of Kyros' wife Labinia and killed mother and child.

Kalla knew what she'd read couldn't be true. But that was all she knew.

There was no way she could get at the real truth. All the accused were being held incommunicado, without access even to lawyers – not that any would have dared volunteer. Kyros, in a stratagem obviously calculated to keep her from intervening, had further decreed that the defendants all be tried and sentenced simultaneously – but in different cities, with the date being announced only afterwards.

They might torture confessions out of them. But Dr. Hayama knew something the others did not: that Candida and her kin yet lived, even if he didn't know where. Would they ask him about that? Would he be tempted to reveal anything to save his own life? The very thought terrified her, and without knowing where he was, there no way she could get to him or his tormentors.

Kalla was racking her brain, trying desperately to find a way to *do* something in the present, when she had a contact from the past – Menander Gabras, chief engineer of the Strymon River lightning power project more than a quarter of a century ago. She could still remember the day they completed the project... Gabras had later taught at the Academy, but was now retired; she hadn't heard from him in years.

It was Athanasios who told her that her old acquaintance wanted to speak with her. They'd had a seemingly chance encounter in the capital, where he was still carrying on the fish business inherited from his brother Symeon – whom he believed dead, and Kalla had never told him otherwise.

Out of compassion for the loss of her surrogate family, he had allowed her to stay at Symeon's former home, and work at the fish farm – no great effort on her part. The authorities had left him alone, perhaps because they wanted to show they could be “merciful,” perhaps only because the business was useful and they didn't have anyone else fit to run it.

Kalla had chafed under the necessity of keeping Athanasios in the dark, and they hardly ever spoke to each other about anything other than the business. How could she explain that her sexual adventures in the capital were still part of an act? What could she say about herself to Gabras? Yet she welcomed a chance to reminisce about old times. Sometimes a distraction like that could free her mind on a deeper level to deal with more important matters.

Only it was *the* pressing matter Gabras wanted to deal with. Athanasios drove him to his estate the next day, and helped him walk the rest of the way to Symeon's house. He was old and frail, and settled on a couch once he reached there. He thanked Athanasios, but told him he wanted to be left alone with Kalla. Athanasios nodded, and went on his way. As soon as he was out of sight and earshot, Gabras got to the point of his visit. He was old and tired and frail, but his voice was clear.

“They're lying about the doctors' plot,” he said. “You must know that.”

“I felt it in my heart,” Kalla said. “But I have no way of knowing.”

“*I* do. I was *there*. I *heard*. But they don't *know* I heard. They'd just given me the sleeping draft, but I wasn't quite under yet – just drowsy. Somebody was shouting just outside; I could swear it was Dr. Hayama. ‘She was bleeding out!’ he said. ‘Why the hell did you wait so long to bring her here?’”

“That can’t have been all.”

“It wasn’t. The next voice I heard... there couldn’t be any doubt. ‘Your lord and patriarch requires that you carry out his will. You have failed to do so. Their deaths are on your hands, and you must...’ And then I was under, and didn’t hear any more.”

Kalla could figure out the rest. There had been rumors that Labinia had suffered complications in the birth of her younger son Leo. And she had been past 40 when she became pregnant again – not willingly, she imagined. Kyros must have insisted that she give birth at the palace, rather than at the hospital run by a “foreigner.” And something had gone horribly wrong; a hemorrhage out of control...

“When I woke up, they hadn’t done my gut surgery, and I don’t know if I’ll get it at all now,” Gabras continued. “Everybody’s crazy there; my doctor and the nurses who assisted him and the gas man have all vanished. They must have heard what I heard – more than what I heard – but they weren’t arrested. Not *officially*. As for myself, Security must not have known I heard anything; at least they didn’t when I came around, or they’d never have let me go home.”

“Is there anything you can do?”

“Not if I want to live. But I don’t think I have long to live anyway. That’s why I was there. But then I thought... *you* could tell the world. They *can’t* kill you.”

“They’ve been killing my reputation.”

“You haven’t been helping maintain it. Did it really hit you that hard? Losing them all? I could understand that. But you’ve got to get past it. For your own sake and the sake of Andros.”

*For the sake of Andros, she thought. For the hope of Andros, I have told lies and lived a lie, and now I must lie to you... or must I?*

“There’s something I need to tell you,” she said. “But if I do, you must agree to remain here.”

Gabras raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t think I’m the kind of company you seem to favor these days.”

“It’s not that kind of company. I need a confidant. Perhaps even a counsel. Do you agree?”

“I might not be safe back in town anyway. They may be looking at anyone and *for* anyone who was anywhere near. I guess I have nothing to lose by giving up what life I would have had left there. So I agree.”

Kalla nodded. And then told him. *Everything*. It couldn’t do any practical good, yet somehow it took a weight off her shoulders. And there was somebody to share the pain when her worst fears were realized.

Dr. Hayama was executed with the rest two days later. He had indeed confessed to murder and treason. So the official announcement proclaimed; Kalla wouldn’t have access to the document, whether or not it was authentic. But there was no indication that Kyros had learned anything about the survival of the family – or the farcallers.

*He died a hero*, Kalla thought. It was a consolation, if only a bitter one.

\* \* \*

Having Gabras as company was another consolation, but also a bitter one. They could talk freely about the future, as if there were a future. As if *he* had a future.

“Daichiugan,” he told her at the outset. “They don’t have a word for it here, but it’s a malignant growth in the lower gut. They were going to cut it out – Dr. Hayama had been training other doctors in treatments already known on his world. But it looks as if I’m stuck with it now, for the duration.”

But he didn’t want to talk about the duration: “Too little time to waste.”

Gabras was fascinated by the farcaller, and the base station – hidden for now under a false floor in what had been Symeon’s bedroom.

“This technology could be used for mass communication,” he said. “I’m sure they must have it on other worlds. Including yours.”

“We have a similar system on Velor. It even transmits images as well as voices and other sounds. But it’s controlled by the Priesthood.”

“The Priesthood? Like the Church here?”

“Not exactly.”

She explained about that as best she could.

“I imagine this sort of communication must be a powerful tool,” Gabras said afterwards. “In the right hands... or the wrong.”

“It should be in everyone’s hands. That’s what Methodios would have wanted. But he wouldn’t have wanted it... the way things are.”

“No need to mince words. You mean under Kyros.”

“You’re the exception. The one exception... except for the family. You can see why I had to denounce them. I may even have to denounce Dr. Hayama.”

“Or me? If somebody finds me out?”

“It depends.”

They left it at that for the time being, and spent the rest of the day reminiscing about progress of other kinds. Copper strings now brought lightning power and light to all the towns and villages along the Great Northern Road, and long distance power lines had connected most of them.

“One of my brightest students back at the Academy got his start reading at home in Segilla, by the new lightning lamps there. If it hadn’t been for those, they’d still have nothing but candlelight. He still remembered Eusebia returning from the power station after the lights went on – she didn’t get any official credit at the time, but he’d seen her around, he knew what she’d been working on.”

“There was Flavia, too – ‘marsh gas lady,’ we used to call her. But there weren’t any other women engineers in those days.”

“Of course, Loukas also remembered Methodios... and you. He was old enough to... pay attention. I suppose he might want to do something about it now that you’re... free. But I doubt if you two will run across each other; last I heard, he was working in the Northern Reach.”

“Did you too ever–”

“Did you ever wonder why I never married or had any children? I admired you, of course... just not that way...”

“I’d never have guessed,” Kalla said, taken aback. “Velorian women pleasure each other, at least when men aren’t available. As for the men, I knew only the Priests and acolytes. I don’t think they’d have approved.”

“Nor those here, or most ordinary Androssians. I can say only that my own life in that regard was... furtive. But then, the other engineers on the Strymon project were

furtive in their own way. They all desperately wanted you, but didn't dare let on – after all, you belonged to the Patriarch.”

“Only on paper, with Jayar. And what bound me to Methodios was love. But it isn't necessarily like that for all Companions. Liessa, for example...”

That story was an eye opener for Gabras.

\* \* \*

They spoke of many other things in the days to come, including from the nature of wormholes and the mystery of the Old Galactics to modernization of highways and bridges here on Andros. Although they were different in every other way, they found that they were twin souls in sharing a curiosity about the universe and a belief in progress – however difficult that might seem now.

It was spring, a good time to be alive. There was music in the air from sundry birds the Seeders had brought from other worlds with compatible ecologies. The bright colors of the flowers, which grew not only on the grounds around Symeon's house but against its balcony, were a delight to the eye.



But Gabras' health was failing, and he was in increasing pain. Kalla was able to obtain anodynes for that. The worst thing about daichiugan, however, was that it was such an *undignified* disease, with bleeding bowels and constipation – and he knew that it could spread to other parts of his body. It was too late for treatment, even if he had dared to show his face in Feodoropolis again. At last, he prevailed on Kalla to show him one last mercy.

“This is a beautiful place and a beautiful day,” he said, his eyes upon the pink blossoms from where he sat outside. “It is a good time to die.”

There were ways to ease his passage, going back to the time of Socrates on old Earth, condemned in the medical literature but described therein. She found one that she could prepare here that would cause the least discomfort.

Kalla held back her tears until she was certain that he was gone, so that his last consciousness would be of her friendship rather than her pity. He deserved that much. She dug a grave for him, near that of Methodios. Just as with Methodios, she committed the location to memory. One day, she vowed, his remains, like the Patriarch's, would be removed to a place of honor.

She didn't know when that day would come. But luck had been with them; for another kind of day she had feared while they had been together came to pass a month later. She had returned home from one of her notorious assignments in the capital to find heavily-armed agents looking for Gabras. She knew before they told her why they were after him – the official story that he was an accessory to murder and treason. She was ready for them with her own story, skillfully embellished from his sketchy account.

"He's long gone," she said. "Came to me the day after with a really crazy story that the Patriarch killed his wife and child himself – wouldn't let her go to the hospital till it was too late. She was too old to have another child anyway, but Kyros forced her and she started bleeding when her time came. Basil and Leo were there to see it all, and were really shaken up. That's what Gabras said. I just laughed at him, and he slunk off."

Kalla eyed the agents, as if sizing them up, as if challenging them to put the weapons between their legs rather than their guns to good use.

"Hey, any of you want to fuck? Gabras was too old to fuck. No good for anything, that one."

Their weapons were at the ready, but none of them took up her offer; she'd been counting on that. They knew they'd be in big trouble if they fucked her and then bragged

about it, as men of their sort almost certainly would. She was playing a bigger game than that here.

They'd want to have *something* to show for their efforts, and so they'd be all the more tempted to tell their superiors the story she'd just planted, a story that would get around regardless of any orders to the contrary. There was surely enough truth in it to cause trouble, to cause dissension. And none would come to bother her again, lest such a visit reveal that they thought she really was on to something she shouldn't be, and thus encourage her to tell others.

What were they going to do? Shoot her?

## 4. Necessary Murders

*It isn't as if I've never killed before...*

Kalla kept telling herself that – and hated herself for it.

*They've managed to find me. That alone puts me in danger.*

But the danger was to her charade, to the image she had so carefully cultivated over the past two years. Not that she'd been able to play that charade since...

*It might put the family in danger....*

That was indeed the case, only “might” was the operative word. Kyros was still in the dark about Nestor and the others. But what of the men who had found her – and he who had sent them? The catapan knew no more than the Patriarch, but could she trust him to have second thoughts about his ambitions if he learned the truth?

She had taken risks before, and those risks had been worth it. She had managed to spirit away some of those who had run afoul or were in danger of running afoul of the

regime. Since most of them had been her lovers, she reasoned, Kyros might chalk it up her sexual addiction. And it had worked... for a while. Until her luck ran out.

Until the night they came for Ioannes Laskaris.

\* \* \*

She had been naked in bed with him at his apartment near the Academy when the factions stormed in. They were dressed all in black, a recent affectation of Kyros' elite police units.

Not that there was anything elite in their manner: the officers of what passed for law under the Patriarch weren't the least embarrassed, and even taunted her.

"Ah," said their captain. "We catch the Great Whore in the act. Our Patriarch will be amused by that. But not by the company she keeps."

"What is the meaning of this?" Kalla shouted, unable to contain herself.

"The meaning of this is that Ioannes Laskaris stands accused and convicted of high treason. You should have better taste in dicks."

Kalla glanced at her lover, whose face had turned red but whose thoughts she couldn't read. Had he been careless with his words, or with something he had written? She'd always cautioned him to be on his guard, and assumed that he had been.

*Accused and convicted.* That was the way of it now. Whatever Ioannes had done or hadn't done, there was no appeal.

"Should we take him with us?" one of the factions asked.

"Why bother?" said the captain, sneeringly, and drew his spitter.

As if by instinct, Kalla leaped to her feet and interposed her body between him and Ioannes, just as he fired. The pellet bounced off her chest, of course, and narrowly

missed hitting another of the factiones. He and the rest all drew their spitters, but Kalla, knowing that she couldn't shield her lover from all directions, moved at lightning speed to disarm them – and crush their weapons with her bare hands.

“Kyros will hear of this,” the captain said, but he spoke as if he were more afraid of the Patriarch now than of her.

“And do *what?*”

Realizing that she'd let her temper get the best of her, she quickly amended her response.

“You can tell Kyros that *nobody's* taking away my favorite dick. I don't give a fuck about this planet, but I give a fuck about fucking, and he's a terrific fuck.”

She motioned Ioannes to get up and get some clothes on, which he did. But he just stood there behind her, without saying a word. He had to know that only Kalla could get him out of this, whatever he might have done to bring it about; that his life was in her hands, and hers alone.

As for the captain, he had been standing there speechless for a few moments, but now he beckoned to his men, who gathered around him. At his signal, they began to head for the door.

“You're not going anywhere until I say so,” Kalla said. “Just be glad I don't break your arms or legs for trying to fuck with me.”

That stopped them in their tracks. It occurred to her only then that she'd have to divest herself of her gold necklace.

*So be it. I can find another,* she mused.

After removing the necklace, she coyly brought her arms in front of her breasts for a moment, then flung them wide as she flaunted herself at the factions.



“Bet you wish you could get what he’s been getting,” she teased them. “Well, you can forget about it. And by the way, don’t try to follow us.”

They wouldn’t have any luck if they did, she reminded them.

“It’s out the door and into the air.”

Now fully clothed beside her, Ioannes appeared caught between wonder and fear as he realized how they’d be making their departure – but couldn’t seem to put either his wonder or fear into words.

“Don’t worry,” she told him. “I’ve done this before. We can talk when we get to Gregoras.”

It was a spur of the moment decision. She'd taken the others she'd rescued to the Northern Reach, where they were living with people she knew she could trust. But Kyros would be so enraged by her open defiance that it might occur to him that she had long had connections in the Reach, and turn his search in that direction. She could only hope that the dissidents already there were *very* well hidden.

Taking Ioannes in her arms, Kalla hovered long enough to let the factions get a good look at them, then headed west.

They would guess her destination; she meant them to. But the chances of their being able to do anything about it were slim. Gregoras was semi-autonomous by law, and while it formally owed allegiance to the Patriarch, it retained its local government, militia and police force. Kyros would have to mount an invasion to get any cooperation, and he might know that it had been only Kalla had been enabled Feodor to impose his will on the wayward realm in the first place, for all his predecessor's show of naval force.

It took the rest of the night for her to cross the ocean, pacing herself as she had with Nestor and his family to avoid harming Ioannes. He nevertheless passed out along the way – from fatigue or fright, she knew not which. It was near dawn when they finally arrived; she set him down gently on a remote beach of the Kolpos Gulf, many leagues beyond the capital Mycenae.

He awakened to the rising sun. She had caught a couple of fish, collected some driftwood, and lit a fire with her heat vision. Lacking a pan, she had simply held them over the flames. Perhaps it was the aroma that had aroused him; he was famished for food, and grateful for what he received – wolfing it down. But Kalla was famished for *information*. What could have gotten him into trouble?

He didn't want to talk about that at first; he hardly wanted to talk at all, except to praise her for rescuing him, and ask what they were going to do next. But she pressed him, and in a tone between embarrassment and relief, came out with what he thought must be the story.

"I was writing a historical *novel*," he told her. "Nothing to do with Kyros, or with you, or even Feodor. It was just about Basil and the unification of the continent, and how he created the themes and gave land to simple farmers and soldiers. It was nothing subversive. But I let some of my students read the manuscript and one of them – I don't know who – must have..."

"... read it as a reproach to what Kyros was doing," Kalla completed.

"Was I foolish?"

"Perhaps. But they still had no right. Nobody should have that right. But what can anyone do? What can even I do?"

"Kill Kyros!"

"And his children? How many others? Should I stoop to his level? What kind of example would I be setting for the future? For the kind of future we both hope for?"

"We may both hope for it in vain," he said. "But who am I to dispute you? You who have saved my life?"

"Who you are, and those of like mind, are the best hope for that future."

"If they don't find me..."

"I'm about to see to it that they don't."

A plan had been forming in her mind, a simple plan that called for the kind of men and women who rarely make any mark in history – yet are the very foundation of

humanity on every world and in every society. Kalla laid out what she intended, then took flight.

Closer to Mycenae she found, as she knew she would find, a fishing village. The fishermen were already out in their boats, casting their nets in the waters of the Kolpos. Kalla hovered in front of one of the boats; the fishermen recognized her immediately, although none could have ever seen her – there was nobody else like her on Andros. One of them, presumably the owner of the boat, hailed her.

“My name is Nikolaos,” he said. “To what do we owe this honor?”

“I need your help, and the help of your village.”

“What help can we possibly be to you? Surely not... we are all married men...”

Had word of her charade reached even here, and been believed? Or was it just the kind of folklore that had grown up about her over generations? Kalla didn’t pursue the question.

“Nothing like that,” she assured him. “It is rather for a friend, falsely accused of high crimes on Romania. You may know what has been happening there.”

“Only what we have heard in Mycenae, where the officials tell us it is none of our concern.”

“Nor would I have you concern yourselves with it. My only concern is... Bardas.

“And who might be?”

“He is a good man. He was a teacher in Feodoropolis, and he can be a teacher here. He could teach your children how to read and write, and establish a school where young and old alike can learn things of interest and potential profit.”

“We have only your word for that.”

“You will have to judge for yourselves. But Bardas is young, and able – even if he proves of no value to you as a teacher, he can learn your work, and earn his keep by it. All I ask is that you tell nobody outside the village about him.”

“That would take some time, and trouble.”

“And I can compensate you for that.”

What she meant was, fill their boats with more fish than they themselves could have netted, which she proceeded to do. They were large fish, good fish, fish that would fetch a good price in the capital.

Nikolaos was amazed, and so were his fellow fishermen. More important, they were convinced; and when they reached shore, they convinced the women of the village – who knew they would soon be hard at work themselves, processing the catch and getting it ready for market. The children, boys and girls alike, the oldest of whom helped with that kind of work, went wild with excitement. They didn’t understand about Kalla, but they knew something extraordinary was happening.

It was rare for anything out of the ordinary occur in a place like this, and when it did, it was nearly always bad news: most likely a storm severe enough to make fishing impossible for days – and even take some of the men’s lives if they were caught far out at sea.

All that was left for Kalla was to return for Ioannes, and bring him here. Nobody in the village would know his true name. But she left a parting word of caution as to the abundance of the catch.

“It was sheer chance, and hard work. Say nothing more in the city.”

When it came time to return to distant Feodoropolis, she was in a mood of self-congratulation at a job well done. But it didn't take long for her to learn that, in her absence, Kyros had taken his revenge: the factions had brutally murdered Ioannes' students, and any acquaintances who might have been inspired or influenced by him. Even he who had betrayed him, whose identity she never learned, had not been spared.

\* \* \*

That was only the beginning. There were more slaughters to come. They might have come in any event, but among the victims of the next were her remaining lovers in the city – apolitical types who had never cast the slightest aspersion on the Patriarch or his regime.

*What have I done?* Kalla asked herself again and again. But what else *could* she have done on that fateful night with Ioannes? She retired to the estate, and looked after the fish pond – the irony of that wasn't lost on her, but it took second place to her anger and anguish. Athanasios came by to comfort her, but that only made it worse, for she dared not comfort him with word that his kith and kin had survived the “crash” of the *Sky Climber*.

There wasn't any reliable news out of the capital, and she wouldn't have paid it any attention to it if there had been. There was nothing she could do about it. But word of mouth, she soon learned, had spread even as far as the Northern Reach.

Ennodios Zarides, its catapan – a nephew of Ignatios, who had held that office during the later years Feodor's reign – was concerned enough to send an emissary, who introduced himself as Stefanos Rossi. He arrived with four retainers, whose names she never learned, but what she did learn...

It hadn't been hard for them to find her; perhaps they had had help from one of the dissidents in the region's care, or perhaps Zarides had worked it out from what was known of her association with the Choniates family. They *had* taken precautions. The five of them came dressed plainly, and had unshaven faces, like ordinary peasants or laborers; they had even told Athanasios that they were interested in working at the fish farm – he must know she had enough men down at the pond, but maybe he took pity on the visitors.

Stefanos produced credentials, under hand and seal of Ennodios, and got right down to business. He spoke with utter sincerity and conviction, and his words were those of a man used to addressing serious matters – without wasting time on niceties or excessive formalities.

“Our Catapan is prepared at this very moment to raise his standard against the tyrant Kyros, and to lead a revolution that will put an end to the suffering the people of Andros have had to endure under his rule. Our forces are well-armed and well-trained, but they need a symbol – and you can provide that symbol.”



“Do you really think so?” Kalla asked, with not entirely false modesty.

“We are aware that you have assumed a role that demeans you in the eyes of the Patriarch, but we also know the reasons for that – living reasons who are under our protection.”

Kalla nodded, a gesture of appreciation.

“But in our eyes, you are still the symbol of all the good and all the progress that has blessed our world since the days of Feodor,” he continued. “And we believe that the common people, even here, still regard you in the same light – and would rise at your command.”

“You would have me command them to recognize the Catapan’s command?”

“And urge them to accept him as Patriarch.”

*Skietra!* Kalla thought.

It was more than a shock. It was a betrayal. She had thought of Ennodios as a righteous man, like his uncle. And perhaps he still saw himself as such, truly believing that only he could save his world. And yet even the noblest intentions could be undone by personal ambition – one of the proverbs of the Bible the Romaioi had brought from Earth warned that “Arrogance goes before destruction, and folly before a fall.”

Kalla said nothing for a moment, while collecting her thoughts. Stefanos couldn't have missed that, or pondered its significance. But she remembered another proverb from the same holy book: that “a humble word turns away anger. And a grievous word stirs up wrath.” So she put her objection to him humbly.

“Law and tradition would give that place to Basil. Yet he is young, and would be in need of wise counsel.”

“The wisest counsel would be to ensure that he or, for that matter, his younger brother never lives to see that day. I can understand that you may prefer not to act for the Catapan on this matter, but it is necessary. The succession must be settled, and the future of Andros set on a strong foundation.”

*Necessary murders. Has it come to that?*

“And if there were other claimants?”

“None close enough to the ancestral line to have any credibility. It is for the best that Nestor has been taken from the scene – a mere boy, like Kyros' sons. Surely you can see that he too could not have been permitted to succeed.”

She could see it all right, and it made her sick. If Ennodios had known that Nestor still lived, he too would have been targeted for elimination. But she couldn't betray her knowledge, let alone her outrage, by word or gesture. She thought of Gabras now, and

knew what she would have to do. She was used to roleplaying, and that experience would serve her well.

“I can see your point,” she said, turning on the charm. “We’ll have to discuss this further. But I have been a poor host. Would you like some wine?”

Kalla expected them to take it as a peace offering, and their expressions showed they did. She excused herself for a few minutes, and returned with six wine glasses on a tray. She knew which were which. That was important.

*It isn't as if I've never killed before...*

But she had to pick one of them to live – and tell. She knew nothing about any of them. They must have wives and families who would mourn them – and hate her. She couldn't delay, and chose the youngest, he who probably had the most of living to lose. It was as simple as that. She served him first, and then the others, and finally took a glass for herself, proposing a toast.

“To freedom and justice!”

“To freedom and justice!” they responded, and drank freely.

It didn't take long, any more than with Gabras.

She endured their cries of incredulity, and then their curses as they realized what she had done to them. The youngest, the one she had spared, was just as incredulous to learn that he was still alive, but no less enraged.

“*Assassin!*” he screamed, and proceeded to call her every foul name in Romaic she had ever heard – and a few she hadn't – until he had exhausted his vocabulary. It was only then that he asked the obvious question. “Why *me?*”

She would not appeal to him with soft words.

“I need to send a message, and you are my messenger. Tell the Catapan what I have done here. Tell him that if he carries out his plan to usurp the Patriarchate, what has befallen his emissary and the others will befall him, but in a more painful manner. Tell him it will be the same if I learn that any of those I have entrusted to the care of the Northern Reach suffer retaliation on his part. You may go now.”

The young man stood up slowly and silently, and as silently left. She knew that he would never forgive her. In the fullness of time, he might understand, but he would still curse her.

*No more than I must curse myself.* But she could never have brought herself to tell him that.

\* \* \*

The lightning power failed just a few hours after she had buried the four men of the catapan’s delegation. As with the other dead, she had committed the locations to memory, but she also wrote their descriptions, numbered in the order of the graves – on the off chance that their kin might one day seek to claim their remains.

Power was restored the next day. Athanasios came by, and told her there had been a breakdown in the wind vane generators; Kyros had accused several technicians of sabotage and jailed them. The rest had somehow gotten the system going again, out of fear for their lives – but in the meantime panic had reigned. There were mobs in the streets, far outnumbering the factiones – some were cursing Kyros, but most were only looting. Business had come to a halt, and commercial traffic still wasn’t back to normal.

“If this kind of thing happens again, we may not be able to keep the fish business going,” he said. “Did you happen to hire any of those men I sent by yesterday?”

“They didn’t turn out to be suitable.”

“Just as well, I suppose, with the future so uncertain.”

## 5. Darkness and the Light

The farcall message from Akshita Johar on Alkmene came out of the blue – and was alarming. Kalla had evacuated the groundside Indrans to the moon two years ago, except for Kamana, after Kyros had made it clear that they were no longer welcome on Andros.

She had also advised the base to contact the *Bountiful Voyager* as soon as it entered the system for its imminent next visit, and warn off the Scalantrans. That had been done, without Kyros having been made any the wiser – did he even wonder why the ship hadn’t appeared?

There had been no more talk of prospecting for sun gas or rock oil Andros, nor any no more talk of aircraft or other technological innovations – no reason to remain in the system at all, except out of concern for Kamana’s safety. The Indrans had since maintained silence. So had Kalla. But now they had to break it.

“We received a call today,” Akshita told Kalla. “It came from Dr. Hayama’s unit. We didn’t answer it.”

“But who–”

There was a delay in Akshita’s response, given the moon’s distance, and further delays slowed the conversation from there on.

“We couldn’t get a fix on the exact location. But it was in the city, in the general area of the Academy. I contacted Nestor immediately to warn him, and have him warn the others – especially Candida.”

. . .

“Has she?”

. . .

“Nestor assured me that that she has accepted the death of the good doctor, and would not be tempted to respond to a call that seemed to be from him.”

. . .

“Whoever it was couldn’t have known who he or she was calling. It’s lucky for us that the codes don’t identify any of us by name. No one here can, without help from one of us, and that—”

Before she could say more, there came a chime at the door.

*Must be Athanasios, maybe an update on the power situation. Or the fish market.*

“Got to go,” she told Akshita, killed the connection and hid the unit.

It was indeed Athanasios, but it had nothing to do with either the power or the fish, although it was immediately clear he’d just gotten back from the capital.

“There was an explosion near the palace this morning,” he told her. “But nobody seems to know any more. The city is swarming with blackcoats, and people have been told to stay off the streets. They ordered me to go home or face arrest. But there hasn’t been any explanation – not a word. What can they be hiding? Could somebody have finally gotten to Kyros?”

“I wouldn’t hold out much hope of that,” Kalla said.

Athanasios exploded.

“Damn you, don’t you even *care* any more? Kyros must die. You should have seen to it in the first place. But no, you had to get Symeon and Flavia and the rest killed in that botched escape attempt. I’m sorry I ever went along with it. I’ll be sorry to my dying day.”

With that, he got to his feet, and began storming out, pausing just long enough to hit her with a parting shot.

“If Kyros still lives, what’s to stop you *now*? Answer me *that*.”

Kalla didn’t have an answer, even one that could satisfy herself. She couldn’t tell Athanasios the truth about the escape, or anything else that might change his mind – and she might not change it in any case. But that wasn’t all that weighed on her mind.

*If they have Dr. Hayama’s farcaller, the family may be in mortal danger right now,* she realized. Had she done wrong in having the *Bountiful Voyager* warned off? Perhaps she should have asked the Scalantrans make a surprise landing at Ethrata, and....

*Only, could I really have brought it off? And how would they have felt about being torn from their homeworld, perhaps forever? What kind of lives could they have made for themselves on Indra or one of the other worlds on the trading circuit? Not that I can do anything about that now – but what can I do?*

\* \* \*

Kalla hadn’t expected to see Athanasios again, and certainly not the next day. But there he was at the door as she returned from the fish pond, checking out the latest harvest there. He was waving a news sheet in his hand. He was so worked up that he didn’t even ask to be invited inside.

“Basil and Leo were killed on their way back from a visit to their grandmother and her folks in the country. At least, that’s what the sheets say. There’ve been runners from the city handing them out. But none of it makes any sense; they’re saying it was a plot by factiones who were spreading lies about him. They’ve been summarily executed, of course, so nobody could ask them.”

Kalla felt a sudden chill, remembering how she had taunted the factiones who came looking for Gabras. Had they been careless who they’d talked to about the “crazy story” she’d told them? Only, the rest didn’t add up: surely – if it had been them – they would never have been involved in an assassination plot.

*Thank Skietra, Athanasios can’t read my thoughts...*

“No word when or how the bomb was planted,” he remarked. “Nothing about who else was killed. No names given for the perpetrators, or any details about their ‘lies.’ It’s like the doctors’ plot – there’s got to be something missing here.”

*If only he knew...*

He hadn’t brought it up yet, but there came another thought, perhaps unworthy of her, but inescapable: if Kyros were to die now... Perhaps another necessary murder was in order. Yet even now, she felt an obligation to consult the family. But that would mean either breaking farcall silence or a furtive night flight...

Sure enough, however, Athanasios returned to the heart of the matter.

“It was Nestor who swayed the family council against ridding ourselves of Kyros,” he reminded her. “But Nestor is no longer with us. Neither are Basil and Leo, and their fate was not decided by any of us. You are the only one left who can free Andros of this tyrant.”

“And who would replace him?”

“Some cousin on his wife’s side, I suppose. Does it matter? Whoever it might be couldn’t be any worse. Or perhaps the Great Synod could choose a new Patriarch.”

“It has never had that power, and for it to try to exercise such a prerogative now would go against centuries of tradition – even assuming it could reach a consensus. A close vote could never win general acceptance.”

“You’re just hiding behind technicalities to avoid taking responsibility. Is that what it has come to? Does it no longer matter to you how the rest of us have to suffer, while you continue to pursue your own pleasure? There was a point to your escapades when you sought to convince Kyros that you weren’t working on behalf of the family, but that time is past. How many men have you had by now?”

“Fewer than you might believe.”

“I can well imagine what they have in common!”

Kalla hesitated a moment, then threw caution to the winds.

“They’re men with nothing to be sorry about.”

“How should I take that?”

“You can take it as you will.”

Athanasios face turned from red to ashen, and it was with resignation rather than anger that he turned and took his leave.

“You once brought hope to our world,” he said. “Now you have destroyed it.”

For a few moments, she watched him walk slowly back home, then turned back to the house. It suddenly registered on her, although she had been aware of it before, that it was late in the year. The blossoms and all they signified were long gone.

That night, the lights went out – and stayed out.

\* \* \*

The distant sound of spitter fire the next morning sent Kalla rushing towards the Great Northern Road.

*Athanasios....*

Were he and his family in danger? She should have thought of that. There must be chaos in Feodoropolis, and it was bound to spread into the countryside. But when she reached his estate, there seemed to be nothing amiss. He was surprised to see her, but assured her that he and his wife and daughters and servants were safe.

“The militia’s taking care of things,” he explained. “I’m going on duty later today to relieve Branas. He has everything in hand, but he needs a break, and people know who I am even though I’m not one of the themata. I can still carry a spitter, but they can trust me not to use it, or order them too, unless we really have to.”

Sergios Branas was strategos of Opsikion, nearest rural theme northwards out from the capital. It had its own power supply from one of the marsh gas plants, and was the principal supplier of grain and other basic foodstuffs to the city.

“Sounds as if they really had to a little while ago.”

“I’ll find out when I report in. They can’t be bothered sending a runner just to keep me informed.”

But Kalla wanted find out what was going on, so she continued on towards the road, where from a distance she saw the militia out in full force – just directing traffic for the time being. But from a nearby tree hung several pellet-riddled bodies, and there was with a sign appended to the trunk.

“Lestis.”

*Robbers. City people, by their dress.*

She kept out of sight for the time being, but with her super hearing she was able to take in what was going on. Branas and his officers were directing refugees to nearby encampments where they could find food from the North that would normally have been delivered to the capital. His men, not all of them in proper uniform – they’d been called out on short notice – ordered traffic, keeping steam cars and other vehicles to the center of the highway, leaving the margins for people on foot. Others were stationed at points further up the road as far as she could see, apparently keeping watch for any trouble.

There wasn’t any sign of higher authority from the city. Branas and his men were ordinary people, helping ordinary people deal with an emergency. That was how things had been done since the time of Feodor, and the community spirit of the themata had survived even Kyros. Kalla was sure that there were similar examples elsewhere in the countryside.

*They don’t need me here*, she thought, overcoming any temptation to put in an appearance. *Like Athanasios said, they have everything in hand.*

But in Feodoropolis...

Still taking care not to be seen, Kalla returned to the Choniates estate, stopping only long enough to bring Athanasios up to date, then took off for the city.

She could see and smell the smoke of burning buildings as she approached, and as she zoomed lower she came across a pitched battle in the main concourse between blackcoats and an angry mob. Reinforcements for Kyros’ forces were approaching in a steamcar equipped with a spring launcher for boomers. Some of the people in the mob

carried spitters; those who didn't had outflanked the outnumbered blackcoats to attack them with stones, but none could survive the boomer.

She didn't like the looks of the mob, but she hated the blackcoats, and that was enough. She descended on the steamcar, taking its operators by surprise, and tore the boomer spring from its mount before throwing it far down the concourse, beyond the mob. The blackcoats ahead of the steamcar saw it flying past them, and those closest to her turned to see what had happened – the rest were still busy with the mob.

They opened up on her with their spitters, shredding her clothes before it dawned on them who and what she was – then turned and fled, leaving the steamcar behind. The mob appeared inclined to pursue them, but Kalla placed herself in front of them.

*“Stop!”* she yelled.

They halted in their tracks.

“They're on the run, and will trouble you no more. You have homes and families. You should be looking after them.”

“Their kind have already murdered some of our people, and left others homeless with nothing to eat,” yelled a man who seemed to be their leader. “Who are *you* to deny us retribution? Where were *you* when others here were being robbed and murdered by the tyrant Kyros?”

There was scorn for her on his face, and the rest – lean and hungry by the look of them – seemed to share that contempt. Of a sudden, she realized that she had no defense – she had reasons, but none she could make them understand. She could not speak for herself, but she could speak from experience of how the good men of Andros had responded to the crisis.

“If you can get past the Northern Gate, you can find help for yourselves and your loved ones,” she said. “The Opsikion Theme has organized relief efforts. They can offer food and safety, but only to those who come in peace.”

“If the blackcoats don’t get to them first,” the man objected.

“Do you know who Athanasios Choniates is?”

“The fish merchant? Kyros had his father murdered, I remember that.”

“He’ll be taking a turn commanding the militia by the time you can get there. And they’re well-armed and well-trained. Do you think they can’t handle the blackcoats? Or would give them any quarter?”

The man only nodded, but his expression seemed to change. Perhaps he could talk the others around. But she didn’t want to press her luck with further argument.

“There’s somebody I need to find,” she improvised. “Someone in greater danger than any of you. And to save him. I need to find out where Kyros is.”

The man now seemed stunned.

“Haven’t you *heard*? He’s vanished. Nobody knows where he is. The palace is deserted, except for people liberating food and making off with ill-gotten treasures. We were too late to get in on any of that. Looks as if you’re likewise too late, if you’re finally here now to do what you should have done in the first place.”

Kalla had been making up an excuse for not staying around, but now she herself was shocked by the turn of events. Was Kyros dead or alive? Either way, how could she find out? Should she contact the family? It was risky, but they had to be ready if Nestor had a chance of succeeding as Patriarch...

She pointed towards the retreating blackcoats.

“Maybe they’ll know,” she said. “That’s one reason not to kill them, isn’t it?”

She didn’t stay for an answer, but sped down the concourse after the defeated foes. She could have simply run, but taking to the air – even if only a few feet off the ground – was bound to make a better impression. She recognized their eikossiarch by his insignia. He was a stout man with a thick black beard and a fierce expression, no doubt chosen to strike fear into whatever enemy he faced – but he was the one struck with fear now.

“Where is Kyros?” she demanded. “Tell me, or your life is forfeit.”

He looked around him. He had barely a dozen men left of the 30 in his command, counting the ten who had come with the steamcar. The rest had scattered; it was every man for himself. He had nowhere to turn.

“Spare me,” he pleaded. “I know nothing. None of us does.”

“You must know *something*. You’re following his orders.”

The once-haughty eikossiarch could only whimper, but one of his remaining men spoke up. He was tall and handsome, and might have appealed to her if circumstances had been otherwise. Unlike his leader, he seemed to be keeping his head about him.

“Our last orders came from a palace courier last night, after the power failed. To keep order. That’s all we know. We were sent here. Others were sent elsewhere. We don’t know what’s happened in the rest of the capital, but the courier said there’d been fighting at the power plant.”

*It all began with the power failure, she thought. Maybe that’s where it’s going to all play out.*

“Maybe I’ll find Kyros there,” she responded, although she doubted that would be the case. “But I don’t think he’ll be giving any thought to the likes of you. I’d advise you to change clothing and drop out of sight. I won’t be the only one looking to get back at your lo.”

“Dark Warriors, Kyros called us. But it seems we’ve been fighting in the dark.”

\* \* \*

Kalla hovered a hundred feet above the lightning power plant.

There was nothing wrong with the vanes on its roof, which kept spinning in the stiff breeze. The building which held the transformers and the headquarters of the Wind Vane Trust was under siege by hundreds of armed men – and hundreds of others were defending it from behind hastily-erected barricades.

But most of the men on both sides wore uniforms of the tagmata. The attackers also included blackcoats; while among the defenders were men without any uniforms – civilian volunteers, presumably. Both sides were armed with spitters, but the attackers were bringing up boomer cars. That didn’t make sense, if their goal was only to capture the plant rather than destroy it. The whole scene was weird – and yet eerily familiar....

*Nesalonika*, she thought.

She remembered Nesalonika, after more than a hundred years – and the part she had played there. None but Feodor and a few others had known about that part at the time. Kalla’s heat vision had turned the tide at Nesalonika; spitters and boomers were new to Andros, and had given Feodor the advantage against superior numbers – except for that inconvenient rain.

But here, both sides had spitters and only the enemy had boomers, which might be put to use at any moment. Numbers didn't matter; arms were on their side. She knew what her part must be today, and she knew too that she must be ready take immediate action – without warning. Even as came to that decision, she saw the crew of one of the boomer cars loading the spring launcher.

Technology had advanced over the generations since Nesalonika. The boomer, she knew, was smaller yet more powerful than those Feodor's army had wielded; it had its own primer instead of a wick. But it exploded just as quickly and even more violently under her terrible eyes, taking with it the car and dozens of the enemy around it. Those who escaped were looking about incredulously, but not looking *up*. Why should they?

The defenders took advantage of their confusion to poke their heads above the barricade and better aim their spitters, taking out dozens more – including the crews of two other boomer cars. Only then did Kalla reveal herself.

*“Cease fire!”* she exclaimed from above, and all heads turned upwards. Everyone on both sides knew who she was. They knew she held no office, and had no authority over them. They didn't even know which side she was on – if either. But they realized immediately that they had no choice but to obey.

Their spitters fell silent, and they could only await what would happen next.

As Kalla reached the ground, half-naked but still imperious, she turned towards the attackers.

“You who have fought for Kyros have been defeated,” she announced solemnly. “Your patriarch, if he can be found, cannot help you now. If you return home peaceably,

without your weapons, it is my will that no further harm should come to you. I shall make that clear to your opponents. Who here speaks for you?”

There was no response at first. Then a pentarch of the blackcoats spoke up.

“Our commander is among the fallen,” he said. “So is his second in command.”

“Perhaps your remaining officers can choose who among them should represent you now, to me and to your former opponents.”

Then she turned to towards the plant and the men behind the barricades.

“Who speaks for you? Let him stand forth.”

A man in tagmata uniform, with the insignia of komes, a commander of 300 men, climbed over the barricade and presented himself to her.

“Giorgios Kalomalas,” he said. “It seems that we have a powerful ally, although I have to admit I can’t understand why.”

“I’ll explain that later. For now, I will say only that I believe that we owe it to the future of Andros to show mercy. Let the defeated go free, and bury their dead. They will fear me enough not to violate my terms, but they will speak of how they were suffered to live rather than die. Word will spread – people in here and in the country will sense that a change is coming.”

“Why should I believe that?”

“Because I have seen the beginnings of it with my own eyes.”

And she told him about the efforts of the militia on the Great Northern Road.

“You would do well to make contact with them, and with other militias. They can help restore order. But that order cannot last without transportation and communication.

This city will need for and other necessities, fairly distributed. But the most important thing will be to earn the trust of the people. We have to build from the ground up.”

Giorgios was skeptical.

“It’s all very well to talk about restoring order,” he said. “But whose order will it be? Nobody seems to know.”

Kalla didn’t have an answer for that – not one she could give out. Not until she learned the fate of Kyros, at least. Perhaps those who had fought in his name would know something.

\* \* \*

But none did. None knew why he had ordered them to destroy the source of the city’s power. Before they were released, the tagmata among them were stripped of their unit insignias, to avoid confusion with those serving under the komes, or any who might join him. The blackcoats were advised to stand down in favor of the regular factions.

Giorgios told Kalla that his unit had been ordered only to take over the plant and somehow get it up and running again, but when he learned what the trouble was, he had staged a mutiny and ordered his men to defend it instead.

“It was the transformers,” he said. “They couldn’t get enough oil to cool them, and some of the coils and cores were damaged, and nobody could find replacements. They *had* to shut down, but that madman thought it was sabotage again. I could see it was crazy, that he was crazy, and I did what I had to do.”

The others who had rallied to the defense were technicians at the plant, and engineering students from the Academy who had come in hopes of helping deal with the breakdown. Some of them gathered in a meeting room, lit by candles, wondering if

there was anything they could do now. Kalla and Giorgios did the best they could to encourage them.

“Do they use the same kind of transformers in Nesalonika?” Kalla asked.

One of the techs nodded. “And at other wind vane plants,” he added.

“We could get help from them, once the roads are open,” she suggested.

“How long will that take?” asked Giorgios. “You say Kyros is gone. Only, who is the patriarch now. Do we even have a ruler now?”

“The people will have to rule, until we know,” Kalla said, not daring to say any more.

“But why did he attack us?” wondered another tech.

“Perhaps he wanted to destroy everything behind him,” Giorgios said. “Is there anything in front of him?” asked a third tech. “If he isn’t dead, where can he have gone?”

“I...” came a voice from a corner of the room.



There was a nervous-looking young woman standing there. From her dress, Kalla knew she wasn't one of the techs. She must be from the engineering scholeio at the Academy.

"My name is Juliana Komnenos," she said. "I shouldn't be here. I should be dead. Kyros wanted all of us dead. All who knew. I was supposed to be with them on a family visit to the country, but my work kept me in the city."

Her story came out slowly and painfully. The short of it was that she had known, from Kyros' son Basil, that it was the Patriarch himself who had been responsible for the death of his mother Libania. The long of it was that he had come to hate Feodoropolis and all it stood for – the Academy, the hospital, lightning power, all the things that had been brought to Andros by the Scalantrans and the Indrans and the Fujiwajin. He held in contempt even the technology that had helped maintain him in power – steamcars and the weapons of the tagmata and the blackcoats.

“He hated *you*, of course, but there was nothing he could do about you. But he could avenge himself, as he imagined it, on those dear to you. Basil told me that he had even held a banquet to celebrate the loss of Methodios' family, although that wasn't the official story. But Basil should have kept his silence about that, and the murder of Doctor Hayama, and all manner of other crimes Kyros committed – in the end, it cost him his life, and the lives of his brother and grandmother. It should have cost mine, and had he known that I missed that trip to the country, it still might have.”

“Do you have any idea where he might be?”

“I saw a strange device at Doctor Hayama's home once, when I began teaching at the Academy. I'd studied there, but I don't think Kyros knew about it at the time; he didn't pay much attention to his distant cousins. I didn't have any idea what the device was, but I knew that it was not of this world. Kyros would have known, too, but whether he ever found out, I can't say. But he may have thought I knew; the last time I saw Basil he told me his father was talking about traveling to Ethrata on an urgent matter. I think he wanted to move the capital back there in any case; it's—”

“*Stop!*” Kalla interrupted. “Don't say anything more.”

“But why?”

“I can’t tell you. But I have to reach Ethrata before he does. The fate of the world depends on it.”

Ignoring the stunned looks on their faces, she rushed out of the room and took to the air.

\* \* \*

And so it came to pass that Kalla Zaver’el stood once again before the ramparts of the old Keep. But this time she was facing away from it, up the road to the north, and none stood on the parapet.

The family she had sworn to protect remained safe inside – out of sight, perhaps even out of mind. She did not yet know what Kyros might know; his coming here might be only desperation, after all else had failed him. She had spied him leading his force of Dark Warriors past Skolios towards Ethrata, but from a height great enough for her to have escaped his notice.

They would find the town outside the Keep deserted. She had arrived in plenty of time to consult with Catapan Boioannes, who had summoned the elders and organized a hasty but orderly evacuation of the residents to outlying farms and villages. It had been late in the day when the operation had been completed, and the fall’s early dusk soon left the town in utter darkness as well as utter silence.

Dawn found Ethrata shrouded in mist. With little effort, Kalla could see through it as the Patriarch’s procession approached. And a strange procession it was, more like a historical pageant than a military operation. Kyros himself led the march, a scabbarded sword by his side, and the Dark Warriors were outfitted as swordsmen and bowmen.

They flanked a highwheeler drawn by greatoxen and equipped with the kind of catapult used of old to hurl stones.

If they were surprised to find the town deserted, they showed no sign of it. Did they think the inhabitants had fled in terror at word of their approach? Did they think the Keep too would be empty and unguarded? And yet, when Kyros emerged from the mist to find a naked woman facing him in front of the gate, he betrayed neither surprise nor resignation.

“Your Patriarch commands you to surrender this place, and the enemies of the Patriarchy concealed within,” he declared.

*So he knows about the family...*

Not that it made any difference. Her words were already prepared.

“You shall not enter the Keep, neither you nor those serving under you. Consider this your only warning.”

“Your magic shall not avail you,” Kyros shouted defiantly.

He stepped aside, and ordered his bowmen to kill her. Dozens shot as one, their well-aimed arrows bouncing off Kalla’s invulnerable body and clattering at her feet. A few missed, hitting the gate, and clattered there. It was the same with a second round; this time, she snatched one of the arrows out of the air and teased the bowmen by using it to caress her breasts, her nipples turning erect. She could hear murmurs among them and the swordsmen – of amazement if not admiration. Perhaps they had heard tell of her without believing what they had heard.

If Kyros heard them, he paid them no heed, but ordered the crew of the catapult to load and launch a heavy stone. How they were supposed to aim it at her, she couldn’t

fathom, but it didn't matter – she set the device afire before they could load it, and the crew scrambled off the highwheeler to safety.

Had Kyros faced only conventional opposition, he would surely next have sent his swordsmen against defenders of the Keep. But unlike the bowmen, they couldn't all have landed blows against Kalla in concert.

Silence reigned for several moments. And then, from seeming denial, he turned to rage, stepping forward to assail the Velorian with his own sword.

Blow after blow he struck, without leaving a mark on her golden flesh. She stood there proudly, hands on hips, chest outthrust, and his strongest blows could not even move her, let alone harm her. She was tempted to taunt him, but let her body speak for her, evincing only a smile as he tried in vain to cut off her arms and then her breasts.

“Witch!” he cried “Sorceress!”

With that, he changed tactics and tried with all his might to stab her in the belly. But his sword broke against her abdominal muscles, the front of its blade clattering to the ground even as the arrows had.

Kyros looked at what was left of his sword, and at Kalla's unblemished flesh, and again at the sword. She could no longer read his expression; it was like nothing she had ever seen. And when he finally found words again, they were like nothing she had ever heard.

“It is only a dream. I am living inside a dream. But I know that I shall awaken, and see my beloved wife and sons again, and all will be well.”

Even the most devoted of his Dark Warriors could see that he was not in his right mind, and they had already seen that there was nothing they could accomplish here.

“Your commander needs to be cared for,” she told them. “Bear him wherever you will to minister to his needs, but begone from here. Let Ethrata be, and do not raise your hands or weapons against your fellow Androssians anywhere. You and each of you will be held accountable. I have spoken.”

Their officers looked at one another, and came to silent agreement. They closed in on Kyros, leading him away to the rear, then ordering their men to turn and follow – a few were detailed to free the greatoxen from the highwheeler after smothering the fire. As the sun broke through the mist, they headed north.

The end for the Patriarch came the following winter... it was ascribed to natural causes, and nobody wanted to challenge that.

## **Epilogue**

It was two years later –1278 by Terran count, the first year of the 992nd Cycle by the Scalantran commercial calendar. Not that it had mattered since expiration of Kalla’s indenture.

Spring had come again, and the forests and fields were green with promise. But at the palace at Feodoropolis, there were other signs of promise. Nestor Tornikios had set a new course for Andros at the outset, declaring a general amnesty for most of the followers of the late Kyros, on condition they accept him as Patriarch.

Nestor had even decreed that Kyros be given an honorable mourning and an honorable burial. The embalmers had performed above and beyond the call of duty in restoring him to his best appearance. Masons and mosaic makers and other artisans

had likewise performed above and beyond the call of duty in restoring the appearance of the palace itself.

Only, the new Patriarch's conciliatory moves had aroused the anger of Candida, who refused to attend the service for Kyros. She knew better than to make an issue of it in public. In private it was another matter – and she blamed Kalla more than Nestor.

"You could have saved Tofky," she lashed out after the memorial service at the Palace for Methodios, who had been reburied there in honor.

Kalla hadn't known what to say, but Athanasios had defended her.

"She saved *you*, didn't she?" he said testily. "But she couldn't save everyone."

"She could save that lover of hers," Candida retorted. "But she didn't even care what happened to his students afterwards."

So Candida had heard about Ioannes. The whole story. Or what she *thought* was the whole story. Kalla hated her for it, but dared not show that. There was no point in arguing with Dr. Hayama's partner; her inner pain needed an outlet. Even Athanasios could see that, and held his tongue.

As for Kalla, she made as dignified an exit as she could. No longer a Companion, she had not been entitled by custom to sit on the third throne at the funeral. Even if she had been, nobody would have gainsaid Nestor for granting it to his recent bride Juliana.

Nestor's marriage was seen by cynics as politically motivated, given that Juliana was blood kin to Kyros – but it wasn't. Only members of the Patriarch's own family knew about her role in saving his life, but that wasn't the reason, either. The truth was that they were deeply in love – she was a perfect match, and a perfect partner. Even as consort, she hadn't shirked her role as an engineer, in helping restore the lightning

power system in the capital; and she was also deeply involved in plans for its expansion there and across the country.

Still, the wedding and a general amnesty for supporters of the former regime who had not engaged in actual murder or mayhem had helped calm the political waters. “Let the past be bygone; let us think only of the future,” he announced soon after he had taken the crown.



“You can play a part in that,” Nestor told her later, at a private meeting.

Not as part of the government but as a silent partner to the Indrans and others in bringing new technologies to Andros. His uncle Alexios was already working with them on a global version of the farcalling system that had heretofore served only the family. But he wanted Kalla to seek their help in developing advanced air flight – and even space flight. There were resources on Andros’ moons and other planets of the system waiting to be found...

“What better assignment for a flying woman?” he said, in a tone between jest and earnest. “You may be out of official sight for a time, but you aren’t out of mind. Your time to serve us more openly again will come.”

Kalla knew why she had to keep a low profile for the time being.

“We have need to accommodate the Northern Reach,” Nestor reminded her, just the same. “And, of course, nobody must know why you went to the lengths you did. As far as the world is concerned, the catapan was always and remains true to the lawful succession of the Patriarchy.”

Kalla understood. She would outlive the enmity of Ennodios, or outlive the man. It was the institutions that mattered. Nestor had already recalled the Great Synod, which declared all violations of those institutions since its dissolution null and void. The great estates were restored to their rightful owners, and the tagmata and factiones reassigned to their normal functions. Militias of the themes had already been fulfilling their duties, and the themes were rewarded with greater representation in the Synod.

Would Feodor have imagined the changes that were coming to Andros, even in his wildest dreams? Kalla sensed that he would have approved, and that was all that mattered. She was content.

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Without waiting to be asked, Kalla had decided to move away from the Choniates estate, taking up residence at Nesalonika, at the villa of the Catapan of Strymon, where she and Feodor had found refuge a century ago. It held pleasant memories for her.

Nikos Makropoulos, the incumbent catapan, offered a warm welcome, but never asked any embarrassing questions. Although Kalla was no longer seen at the Palace in Feodoropolis any more, or at the Academy, she kept in contact by farcaller with Nestor and other family members. There were occasional visits from some of them, and others whose lives she had saved – like Ioannes Laskaris, now working in the rural education program.

She still worked with the Indrans. Flying from Nesalonika to Alkmene and back was no harder than doing so from Feodoropolis, although when she ferried Indrans from the moon to work on the planet she had to land them at a discreet distance from the capital. Their latest projects were to be formally announced when the *Bountiful Voyager* made its next visit.

However things might work out for her personally, Kalla – like Nestor – was committed to the future of Andros. She too faced the work of a lifetime – several lifetimes by ordinary human standards. Had she known that at the beginning, when she first set foot here – known that she would see generations pass before her eyes – the challenge might have daunted her.

But she was a different person now. She had learned much and loved much, and been through a great deal. She was sure she could put the doubts and disappointments of the past behind her, and weather any doubts or disappointments yet to come. She knew what she had to do, and she was ready for it.

[CONTINUED IN BOOK THREE](#)