

Empress of the Dawn

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Book Three: Peace and War

Part One: Secrets and Lies

Prologue

Kalla was free. Her life was hers alone. And yet she still felt a sense of belonging to this world – a world that was the only constant in her existence.

She hadn't expected to live this long. Neither had the Scalantrans who had sold her indenture to Feodor more than a hundred of their years ago – 118 Terran years, nor the Velorians who had profited by it.

She was now 136 by Terran count, and still no signs of aging – during the reign of Jayar, more than 40 years ago, she had thought she must be a freak in that regard, but the Scalantrans had set her straight. Anyone she had known on Velor was long gone, and most of those she had known on Andros, or among the Scalantrans, were even longer gone. Only her fellow Companions still lived – and they were far distant.

She hadn't kept in touch with any of them for more than a few round trips of the *Bountiful Voyager* after settling here, and in truth she had never particularly wanted to. It was only because of the relations between Andros and Indra and Fujiwakoku that she

had known anything about the recent careers of Liessa and Jaleel, and Liessa was the only one she had heard from directly. As for the others, there were only the occasional anecdotes from the Scalantrans, as in the case of Marzha and the lottery on Siguo.

How well did I ever really know any of them? she pondered. *After all, we shared barely a year and a half together on the trip out. Yet I spent 50 years with Feodor; I knew Jayar and Methodios practically all their lives. I still treasure the years I remember with Feodor and Methodios – and I still feel an attachment for their families that I can never feel for those distant Velorian kin.*

Only, now that she was no longer a Companion, she had a personal life and love she had chosen for herself. She was living with Andronikos Makropoulos at his estate near Nesalonika, where they made free with their bodies... and souls.

As catapan of Strymon, he had been forced into hiding during the terrible reign of Kyros – but he had known from the start that he was in danger as an Andros family loyalist, without her having had to warn him.

That meant he never imagined himself as in debt to her, any more than she could imagine him as a reward for having saved the world. Nor was he either fixated on her or intimidated by her as a Velorian: he treated her as a *woman*. That was what attracted her to him. With Nikos, she never had a role to play; she could just *be*.

She had known him casually during the reign of Methodios, and met him again at after the Restoration. He was a widower with grown children by then; that was enough to make him fair game. Only she couldn't look upon him as mere game, even though he was handsome and energetic for his age. And experienced – he knew his way around a woman's body, and could be slow and gentle or fast and furious. Depending...

Today it would be slow and gentle. She had come naked to the lake, and he had followed. When she turned her head, she saw that he too was naked – and hard. She donned her gold necklace, lay back and let him slip inside her – savoring the feeling of being filled with a loving cock by a loving man.



When he began to move inside her, it was heavenly. And when he finally came, and she came, it was even more heavenly. She felt all aglow inside, but before long she felt afire inside – and he knew how to stoke that fire. She was thankful for her Velorian pheromones, and so was he; he could keep coming back for more.

“Kai tamoor’sk!” he shouted as he came again – “I love you” in her own tongue. And soon he put *his* own tongue, and teeth and lips, to good use between her legs – licking and sucking then biting her clit. He was rewarded by her shudders and screams of pleasure, but he wasn’t through with her – he eagerly lapped up her fragrant juices, and she came again.

They pleased themselves and each other in many ways that afternoon... And when they were done with that, they talked about the lives they had already lived, and would yet live; about the world they both cared about, and what the future might hold for it. Kalla could even commiserate with him about how Candida still blamed her for the death of Dr. Hayama, and concerns about certain cultural trends like violent outbreaks at steamcar races. For her, and him, there were no secrets and no lies.

Except for such few worries, this was the happiest time of her life. She was free of the political responsibilities that had come with being a Companion – even if they had never been part of the Indenture that Feodor had signed with the Scalantrans a hundred years ago. Nestor had come to the throne young, and had a long reign ahead of him. He was unlikely to face any real challenges and, if he did, there was always the Family Council to advise him. She was content to do her part with the Indrans to bring new technologies to Andros, including the Patriarch’s dream of air and space travel.

It had been an eventful time since the day she had set foot here. It was now 1278 by Terran reckoning. By sheer coincidence, the sidereal year on Andros was almost the same as the Galactic year. That made for irregular seasons, but the Androssians were used to it. So was she. She hardly ever thought of the Velorian year, which was slightly shorter than the Terran – her age on her world of origin would be 143.

Would she outlive Nikos, as she had the patriarchs? Or would time finally catch up with her? It might be fitting, somehow, if old age – which was sudden and shorter for her kind – caught up with her in time for her to share it with his. That might give her long enough to complete her work on the projects Nestor had envisioned, and she could then leave Andros to its blooming golden age. A perfect ending...

But on that sunny afternoon, Kalla could not reckon on what she would learn, to her cost and the world's, when the Scalantrans returned later in the year...

Chapter 1. Surely Some Revelations

For Kalla, like everyone she knew on Andros, the arrival of the *Bountiful Voyager* had been an occasion for rejoicing. Word spread like wildfire when the Palace made the official announcement, conveyed by farcaller relays all the way from Feodoropolis to Ethrata in one direction and to the Northern Reach in the other.

It was hailed as a return to normality, what people were calling the Restoration. The visit had been expected, of course. The Scalantrans were always punctual. There hadn't been farcallers in the old days, but dealers in shinefur, olive oil, wines and other exports had known to the day when to set up shop for the trade fair. They had been punctual four years ago, when things were far from normal.

Kyros had been Patriarch in 1272, when the *Bountiful Voyager* had been due on its outbound voyage to Andros and the more distant seeded worlds on its circuit. Only, it had been warned off by Alkmene. That warning had come at the behest of Kalla herself, who had held no official position. She held none now.

Yet it was she who received a farcall from the travel captain, Vahirem, by name, as the *Bountiful Voyager* approached on the inbound leg of its circuit, headed for Velor. He had a simple question: "Is it safe?"

"Yes," she told him. "You will find that Andros welcomes you under its Patriarch Nestor Tornikios."

A simple answer. Only, Vahirem wasn't finished.

"Our historian Pakiula wishes to meet with you," he said.

So Cherya must have retired, or even died, Kalla thought. She felt a twinge of regret, knowing that she would never see her again. But she had outlived generations of Scalantrans, just as she had outlived generations of Androssians. That was part of her life; there was no point in bringing it up. But protocol was still protocol.

"I shall be happy to see her at the trading ground."

"Not there. *Here*."

Definitely *not* protocol; Kalla was taken aback. "But why?"

"It is a matter I cannot discuss."

Reaching the ship in orbit was no problem for Kalla, nor was cycling through the airlock. Once aboard, she was hustled into the white room by Pakiula, where the two of them could be neither interrupted nor overheard.

"Cherya is teaching on one of our youthworlds now," the new historian told her. "But when I was chosen to succeed her, she advised me to take you into our confidence on matters involving the Companions. There is something you must see, and after you have seen it, you may be able to advise me, and I can then advise the others."

What Pakiula had to show was a visual recording, something that could not be played outside the ship – Andros didn't have the technology for it yet. But what really startled her was the face that appeared on the screen.

“Jerusha!” she exclaimed.

Pakiula paused the recording for an explanation.

“It is indeed her. She approached our agent for Ulakinil at our last call there and asked to see Captain Vahirem. We hadn't had any contact with her since she entered her indenture, and we had been told by the natives that this was her own decision.

“But she had a different story to tell, a story she had wanted to bring to your High Council for Off-World Affairs. Her most recent master Rasasingan had given her leave to return home, but we had to inform her that we were not authorized to allow that. The most we could do was carry a message. It was for Velor's eyes only, but because you are First among Companions, and have ever shown a serious interest in difficult social and political issues, I am taking it upon myself to share it with you.”

With that, she let the recording play again. It was hard for to Kalla understand, and even harder to endure. Jerusha had been settled on a world where two factions had been at odds ever since the seeding, and the ruler of one had acquired her indenture. Over the decades, there were several attempts at assassination by the other faction, which she had prevented – taking the lives of the assailants. Only, that hadn't been enough for Nandivarman, who had ordered her to wreak vengeance on their families.

Opposition to the ruler soon dissipated, and Ulakinil had seemed to be at peace. Jerusha had seen little of the world outside the capital, being kept at the palace to serve as a virtual prisoner. But the third Pandyan ruler to inherit her indenture, Rasasingan, told

her he had become the target of a new round of conspiracies by the Turoki, whose very name meant “traitors,” and he had enjoined her to strike against them in advance.

She had done as she was ordered, feeling herself obligated. But then one of the palace servants, herself Turoki, had dared whisper to her that the alleged conspiracies were all imaginary, and that those she had slain had been only the owners of lands or businesses coveted by the Pandians. Jerusha, whose indenture had been just about to expire, ended her recording with an almost tearful appeal:

I ask all of you of the High Council... is this our “high purpose” as Companions... to be robbers and murderers as well as lovers? Am I the only Companion being placed in such an intolerable situation? Does the High Council know anything of life on seeded worlds? Does it have the slightest awareness of what happens to us after we are sold? I may have no right to appeal to you, but I know that I am right to try. Having told you my story, I shall trust the Scalantrans to deliver it, and as soon as they depart, I shall slay Rasasingan – and then dive into the sun. I know that I could soon live free, but I cannot live with myself. So be it.

Kalla couldn’t speak for some moments, thinking of Kyros, trying to imagine what she would have faced had she ever had to serve him as Patriarch.

“This is *insane*,” Kalla said. “Can’t anything be done?”

“We will inform the High Council, but it may be to no avail. There is pressure from the Senate to augment Velor’s wealth by indenturing new Companions on worlds like yours where the original indentures have expired as well as on worlds new to the trade. When we undertook the trade, nobody knew how long Velorians would live beyond the gold field, or that they could serve any other role than pleasuring men.”

“None of us knew,” Kalla recalled. “Our powers came as a complete surprise to us, and we still don’t know how many years fortune has granted us. But this is nothing new; Cherya was well aware of it generations ago.

“What’s new is that the Senate wants to make up for lost time, and income, by indenturing new Companions even on worlds where others are already serving, without waiting for their terms to expire; and to sell multiple indentures at the outset wherever there are sufficient potential buyers.”

Now Kalla was alarmed – and angry.

“That could lead to Companions being set against one another on behalf of their masters!”

“You have good cause to be concerned, and if such even *might* become the case on Andros, I would strongly advise that you appeal to the Patriarch and Great Synod to prohibit it. We are and would be bound by planetary law...”

Pakuila paused for a moment.

“I must also share the story of Rilanna, which we were ashamed to tell you at the time, although we later mentioned that there had been cases elsewhere. Her buyer was King Beowulf of Myrce – but when she first bedded him she misjudged her strength, even under gold, and he was left... less than a man. The law of the land was that she be declared outlaw, and any man might slay her with impunity.”

“But—”

“Indeed, none could, although many tried. She managed to avoid killing or badly injuring any of her assailants, but later fell in with true outlaws, who offered her board and bed in return for her protection. Eventually, they founded a realm of their own in the

remote highlands of the main continent. She is still there, to the best of our knowledge, but we have had no contact with her or her people.”

“And of course you informed Velor of this?”

“Indeed we did. We were assured that the High Council would take greater care in training. Since then we haven’t heard of any further... accidents. But we were advised to say nothing of this. Myrce was understandably reluctant to accept any Companion afterwards, but Hrothgar, the grand-nephew of Beowulf, was finally... persuaded.”

Silence hung in the air.

“And the new Companion might have to deal with the old?”

“Since Rilanna’s indenture has expired, I suppose they could justify it. But more disturbing to *us* than the stories of Jerusha and Rilanna are developments that have to do with the Aureans. And this too you must not share with anyone on Andros.”

Kalla had learned about the background of that from Sulva, ship historian during Feodor’s reign, but hadn’t shared it with the Patriarch. It had begun with the First Strike. Some years after she and her fellow Companions-to-be had left Velor, a caravan of Scalantran ships had landed on Aurea, hoping to open trade. The Aureans had attacked them, enslaving the traders and converting the ships to their own use.

Because they were simply trading vessels, adapting their technology for use in warships was an onerous task – one still in progress at the time of the Scalantrans returned two cycles later. They had sent a single warship, but it was far advanced over anything the Aureans had, and their defenses couldn’t hope to match it. After giving fair warning, that ship had wiped out the Aurean before it could be mobilized, destroyed the orbital infrastructure and obliterated the planetary capital. The First Strike.

The Scalantrans had more to gain from eliminating Aurea's technological threat than from killing its people. It had been the same centuries earlier in a conflict with the Diaboli, a telepathic race that had exploited its mental powers to cheat them in trade. Having discovered this once they were out of range of mind-control, the Scalantran ship had simply thrown rocks at the offending world, and the Diaboli had never troubled them again. With the Aureans, however, it was different. *Very* different.

"We learned only recently that they have developed new warships and planetary defenses," Pakiula said. "It will take generations for us to reach a consensus on how to respond. Thus far, they have made no overt moves against us, but they have annexed a few planets in their immediate region. They may anticipate and mean to counter another attack on our part, or they may have ambitions beyond that."

Even though its trading circuit was far from Aurea, she continued, the *Bountiful Voyager* was now armed with energy weapons. Ships in other sectors were taking their own counsel, some arming themselves, others waiting watchfully for more definite signs that an Aurean threat seemed likely to materialize.

"If war ever does come to our sector, Andros could be caught up in it," Pakiula now said, an ominous tone in her voice.

"Why Andros in particular?"

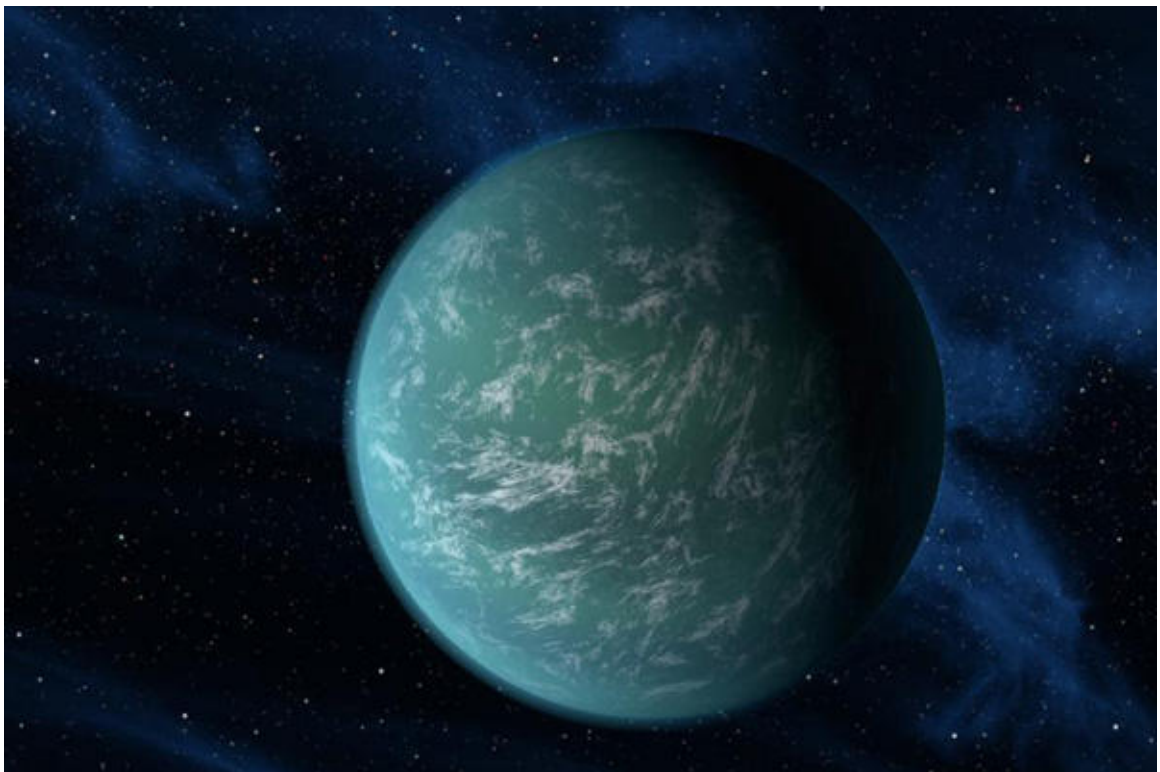
"It's strategically located along our trade route; if the Aureans could establish a presence here, it could cut off Indra and the further worlds and make it far more difficult for us to help defend those worlds."

Kalla didn't know what to say.

“Indra is aware of the situation, and is willing to share its space technology with Andros,” Pakiula said. “We had already encouraged them to establish a presence in your system. But it will take some time for Indra to build a fleet of warships; that is a massive undertaking. And we can’t let any hint of it get around... lest it reach the Aureans.”

So that was the way of things... what has been the way of things

And so it began. As Kalla looked homeward from space, she could have no idea how it would end.



Chapter 2. Below and Above

“It can’t come from me, or seem to come from me,” Kalla told the Family Council. “Whatever we do, moreover, can’t appear to be directed at the Scalantrans. They are only

intermediaries. It is Velor that established the trade, and now appears intent on changing the rules of the game – perhaps even the terms of indenture.”

Nestor had called the family together at the Choniates Estate, although it usually met at the Palace. The Patriarch was reluctant to have anyone in the capital besides his kin and a few trusted intimates know that the former Companion was taking part. It was a delicate situation, with Candida, who – still blaming her for the death of Dr. Hayama – had refused to come *because* Kalla was taking part.

It wasn't a matter of whether to prohibit the indenture of another Companion on Andros, but rather of how to present the matter to the Great Synod. For Kalla, it was a matter of sending a message to the High Council without it seeming to come from her – and without giving away what else she knew from the Scalantans, to either the High Council or the Family Council.

“The most obvious approach would be raising the specter of a Velorian beholden to another Kyros,” Nestor said. “But that would mean reopening old political wounds, something we can't afford. Nor can we appear to show a lack of confidence in the future of the Patriarchy. And I cannot abide the hurt it would cause Juliana and Libanius, who would grow up in the shadow of that hurt.”

Libanius was their firstborn son – and, though only a year old, therefore heir to the Patriarch. It was part of Nestor's policy of conciliation that he had been named for Libania, wife of Kyros and Komnenos kin by birth. But now Nestor was putting it to the Family Council how to deal with the possibility that Velor might propose to place another Companion here.

There were also matters involving the Indrans to be taken up by the Council, and several domestic policy issues, but Kalla's topped the agenda. On purely domestic matters, she did not volunteer any proposals.

After much discussion, it was Flavia Choniates who broached what seemed the obvious solution to the double Companion issue. As a woman of business, it had come naturally to her. Perhaps it had also come naturally to Symeon, but he usually deferred to his wife in such matters.

"It's an issue of unfair competition," Flavia said. "Given that the Patriarchate is no longer in the market, the only potential buyers are great businesses – greater than our own, I dare say. But if such a business gains an unfair advantage because it has one of your people at its beck and call, one of its rivals will surely want to offset it. From what you say, the terms of indenture put no limit on what their Companions could be called on to do – including criminal acts. How could we punish such acts? It could undermine the rule of law we have worked so hard to restore."

"Taking this action will also let our family's critics in the Synod know that we aren't beholden to Velor and will not seek such an unfair advantage ourselves," Symeon added. "It should obviate any temptation by potential adversaries here or the Northern Reach to seek the same sort of advantage."

Kalla breathed a sigh of relief. Nestor himself called for a formal motion, which Symeon was pleased to offer, and Flavia's proposal carried the day. Now if only the issue of the air and space flight program were as easy to resolve...

"We know why the Indrans on Alkmene can't land their spaceship on Andros," said Alexios, who as Minister of Science oversaw technological development. "But is it

possible for them to obtain one that *can*? Or could they help us build one that could fly between here and their base?”

“Kumar told me before he left that construction and sale of spacecraft is strictly the prerogative of the Guild of Air and Space Transport Engineers,” Kalla explained. “His team required special dispensation to assemble its craft here, since it didn’t qualify as a ‘resource.’ But he said he’d bring up our request when he reached Indra.”

Of course, Kumar already knows what the “answer” will be...

“Is that all?” Nestor wondered. “If the Resource Engineers can send people here, why can’t this other Guild? As Patriarch, I could make it a formal request. And if Liessa might intercede for us...”

“I will bring that up with Akash, the new headman,” Kalla promised. “And Kumar will be stopping by here on the way back from Velor to Indra two years from now. He could convey your appeal.”

And perhaps also suggest that there might be a place for another Companion with the Transport Guild – given that the market here will be closed.

Kumar and his contingent had turned over the base to their replacements when the *Bountiful Voyager* arrived from Indra. Given limited living space and supplies, even with expansion to accommodate larger numbers, it was impractical to house two full complements at once, so it made sense for the departing group to leave as soon as the new one arrived – but for a few involved in the transition – even if it meant heading to Velor before heading for home. As long as the Scalantrans were picking up the tab, the Guild wasn’t about to complain.

“Well, there’s nothing more we can do right now,” Nestor commented. “We’ll still have their groundside people here meanwhile to work on other ongoing projects. We have to keep things moving.”

One of those things was the farcalling system, which Nestor wanted expanded to include educational outreach. Children even in remote villages, he argued, should have a chance to gather around receivers and share classes taught in the capital.

“It doesn’t have to be limited to children,” remarked Alexios. “The Academy could take part – there must be thousands of young people in the outlying themes who find it beyond their means or simply inconvenient to travel here for higher education.”

“Farcalling could also be used to spread information about public health,” added his wife Petronia, who taught history at the Academy in Feodoropolis. “Not to mention giving basic medical education, and conveying word of medical emergencies.”

An off-handed way to raise a delicate matter, Kalla knew.

“It would be a further honor to Dr. Hayama,” observed Nestor, recalling how the doctor from Fujiwakoku had performed a life-saving operation on him when he was only ten. “I wouldn’t be here today but for him,” he remarked. “Perhaps none of us would.”

It was a sobering moment for all of them.

“That is why I have already decided it would be fitting for the hospital be named for him,” he added. “It is the least we can do for him... and for Candida. Perhaps it will help her overcome her grief. I trust there are no objections here.”

None were raised. Everyone here knew how much Nestor wanted to keep peace in the family, to heal the wounds there as well as in the world at large. It was going to be

a balancing act, and he would have to avoid giving the public any impression that he still sought advice and counsel from the former Companion.

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Two days after the Family Council session, Kalla flew to Alkmene to confer with Akash Simha, who had settled in as *mukhiya*. As a new arrival, he was better informed than his predecessor Kumar Patel. She didn't need to play games with him.

Besides Akash and the other Indran men and women, the *Bountiful Voyager* had brought components for a prototype solar furnace that might be duplicated on Andros itself to replace the black rock furnace at a foundry near the capital devoted to making uruku steel products. But here today it would serve another purpose: as an energizer for Kalla.

She had used solar energy from her earliest years on Andros to produce orgone, and even flown near the sun when she needed a *lot* of it. But now that she'd be making additional trips back and forth between the planet and the moon, and bearing heavier loads, it would be more convenient for her to power up at the base. Once the Indrans had tested the furnace out on a sheet of steel – which ran like water as the beam melted a hole in its center – it was time to try it out on herself.

Kalla felt a rush of pleasure as the torrent of energy heated her invulnerable body red hot, then white hot. Her breasts stood out like twin suns, growing impressively larger in moments as they converted the concentrated sunlight to orgone. She put her hand between her legs and gave herself orgasm after orgasm, each more intense than the last. It was heavenly, and she wished it could have gone on for longer, that she could forget that she had any responsibilities – or any qualms about them.

But as she finally came down, she came to her senses. There was business at hand with Akash, and business to come with Indra itself and the Scalantrans and Nestor – business she hadn't known about until a few days ago, business she would never have wished for. It all came at a time of transition for the Indrans here, as well as the troubling developments for Andros of which she could say little to the family.

Kumar and the rest of the former complement of six had been happy to leave Alkmene after 12 years to make room for their successors. Four others who had served here for only eight years were staying on to help with the transition – they'd join the rest on the *Bountiful Voyager* on its outbound journey.

Like their predecessors, the 20 new Guild engineers here had been paired off in advance by lot – to avoid any jealousies or other complications. Like those who had left already or soon would, their relationships would be dissolved whenever they returned home. It was different for the dozen Indrans working on Andros itself; they could live with natives and even form attachments with them if they so chose – although actual marriage was out of the question.

Akash, having been at the controls of the furnace, was the only one here to have witnessed her trial by sunfire, and she had felt a twinge of embarrassment afterwards. It was obvious that he knew what she'd been experiencing, and it was equally obvious how he'd reacted as a man – she could see that with her tachyon vision. But she knew better than to allude to it afterwards; her conversation with him and other Indrans was strictly business, mainly the farcalling project.

Fortunately, that was something the Indrans here could help with openly, in terms of raw materials, designs and manufacture. There were pure nickel-iron moonlets within

their reach, and also sources of other metals and crystal that could be used in farcaller components.

Of course, Kalla would have to bring the first units to Andros – very carefully. In time, Indrans on the planet would be able to set up manufacturing there. It was going to be boring work, fetching and carrying, but the quality of the moonlet metal and crystal was better than what could yet be produced in any quantity on Andros – and it could be delivered sooner.

Nestor needed something to make a big impression, what with the lead time for bringing air and space travel technology to Andros. It was only after going over details of the technology and logistics for farcalling and even farspeaking that Kalla brought up Nestor's appeal.

"We both know it is in our mutual interest to accommodate Andros," he said. "But we can't play our hand yet. You should tell your Patriarch that it will be a terribly costly undertaking, far beyond the means of your world. All the shinefur on Andros couldn't pay for development of the kind of industrial base that would be required. You would need vast resources of iron and steel and other metals, advanced forms of what you call pottery. Machines to produce the components, and machines to make those machines, factories to produce fuel for the spacecraft, great expansion of lightning power... the list is nearly endless."

Kalla knew full well that Andros couldn't pay for any of that. In fact, it wasn't even paying for the Indrans' work here, although the Scalantrans pretended otherwise in the accounts they shared with exporters at their trade fairs. Not that they were cheating the exporters; they were funding the Resource Engineers strictly from their own profits, and

the covert aid of Indra itself. How to increase that aid, and keep it covert, would be a challenge.

But she had to keep up the fiction, to tell Nestor only what he would reasonably expect to hear....

Chapter 3. Comfort and Joy

The Great Synod had duly met, and had duly approved a measure prohibiting any further indentures of Companions. That had been per plan; as had been a stipulation by Nestor that Kalla did not have any official standing with the government, or any vested interest in the legislation.

“She is now working with the Indran Guild of Resource Engineers on projects for rapid communication and flight technology that were initiated by Patriarch Methodios,” he said. “I appreciate, and I am sure we all appreciate, her efforts on our behalf. And we can hardly forget that, had it not been for her, I would not be standing here before you today.”

This was as far as he could go without mentioning Kyros. That too was according to plan. But it had been later in the same session, without any apparent connection, that Nestor announced the appointment of Dr. Candida Andros as Minister of Health – a new post justified, he explained, by the anticipated expansion of organized health services and health education beyond the capital.

During her years as a Companion, Kalla had been revered by many as practically a consort to the reigning Patriarch, but reviled by some as only a prostitute – Kyros had played on that. And during his reign, she had exploited the same image to distract him from her efforts to safeguard and then to hide the family.

Since the Restoration, she had had to live down the reputation she had fostered in that dark time. Worse, there were those ardent admirers who imagined that she might be theirs for the asking. She had always had ardent admirers, but when she had been a Companion they had known she was off limits. They had had to indulge their fantasies alone, or with prostitutes or women pliant enough to cater to them. Only now...

Kalla kept a low profile in her relationship with Nikos, speaking of it to only his family and the Patriarch's. As a high government official, moreover, he had certain prerogatives – one of them being to refer any unwelcome visitors to the factiones. So far that hadn't been necessary...

It was Nikos who informed her of the Great Synod's vote, a formality taking place during her visit to the moon, when she flew home. By then the story had appeared in the Nesalonika news sheets as well as those in Feodoropolis, and it had been played just as Nestor had hoped.

"The Patriarch farcalled me the night before the Synod met," Nikos told her. "So I wasn't exactly surprised."

"I still have to tell him the latest from the Indrans. They're getting down to work on the farcalling network project. I expect we'll have enough units for a demonstration here within a year."

"And will there be a demonstration of flight, too?"

"We can't expect any help there. We're on our own."

She hated to lie to Nikos, perhaps even more than she hated to lie to Nestor.

"You had time to fly all the way to the sun?" he asked, observing the state of her breasts.

“No, the Indrans brought the sun to me.”

She told him then about the solar furnace, about how it had made her hot in more ways than one.

“I was thinking about you all the while,” she teased him.

A white lie, and yet there was a truth behind it. However intense her experience with the solar furnace, when it was over it was over. It had served its purpose, but that purpose was impersonal. It left her Velorian body’s orgone hunger fulfilled, but had done nothing for her soul.

Yet here, there was human closeness. She looked at Nikos with loving eyes, and he returned her gaze. To have this man beside her, inside her, was her greatest joy and solace – something to treasure in her heart, before and after. She took him by the hand and led him to the bedchamber.

“Take your clothes off,” she said softly as she donned the gold necklace she had been keeping by the bedside. “Then take me.”

She disported herself on the bed, displaying her gravity-defying breasts with their hard nipples. Her legs were spread, and the heady scent of her Velorian womanhood, already damp with desire, filled the air. Nikos quickly stripped; he was ready – more than ready. And then he was on her, and *in* her.

Kalla rejoiced as he pounded her into the bed, triggering all pleasure points that lined her womanhood. He cried out her name as he came, and felt her come. And that was just the first round. In the afterglow of their first orgasms, they kissed tenderly for a time. Soon Nikos began moving southwards, kissing her breasts – and then biting her nipples with all his might. She gasped and screamed with delight at that, and even more

so when he buried his face between her legs, licking and nibbling and drinking his fill of her fragrant juices.

She came and came, and that was an inspiration for Nikos. When his manhood was ready once again, she rolled him on his back and took top position. Slowly, ever so slowly, she impaled herself on him. She looked deeply into his eyes, and he just as deeply into hers. They didn't move for a few moments; she savored feeling him deep inside her, just as she knew he savored being there. But after those few moments, they couldn't stand it any more, and it was her turn to pound him into the bed until he exploded within her and she exploded around him.

Their cries of release might have wakened the neighborhood if the villa had been any closer to the city. They were followed by murmurs of tender love as they hugged and kissed and caressed each other.

So passed the evening and the morning of Kalla's first day back home...

They couldn't make love all the time, of course. But they could talk. Mostly it was small talk, about what was going on in and around Strymon, about his family – his sons and daughters and their children were frequent visitors, and accepted their relationship even if it wasn't sanctioned by law or custom. But they would also still talk – even in bed – about their hopes for the future, which were much the same.

"I don't suppose I'll live to take an airship to Feodoropolis," Nikos ventured one night. "Let alone visit the moon."

"You could fly with me. Feodor flew with me. And I flew Nestor and the others to Ethrata to save them from Kyros.

“No thanks. I’d be scared out of my wits. In my head, I know you wouldn’t drop me. But in my gut... Anyway, I’m too old for that kind of thing.”

“But not too old to ride me,” Kalla said with a wink.

Nikos took her in his arms and began kissing her passionately.

It was good to make love. It was good to have someone with whom to share her mind as well as her body. In moments like these she could almost forget the secrets and lies that troubled her. Almost...

If only she could share what the Scalantrans had told her – and other matters, such as the treachery of Ennodios, known only to Nestor. She longed to confide in this man, who had brought her such joy and solace. But she dared not.

Chapter 4. Public and Private Lives

“I owe it to you,” Nestor told her a year later, as he prepared to bring a farcalling network to Andros for the first time. “I owe it to the family. And we owe it to *them*.”

Today, for the first time since the Restoration, he and Kalla were back in Segilla. It was an occasion she welcomed, and yet she was still worried about other matters that were still in abeyance.

The village had long had a sentimental value for her, going back to her years with Feodor, but it had also become a showcase for new technology under Methodios – it was the site of the Flavia’s first marsh gas tank farm, and then the first to be lit by the lightning power pioneered by her sister Eusebia Tornikios, mother of the Patriarch-to-be.

Today it was to be a showcase again – this time for a community-wide farcalling system. The Indrans had raced against time to produce enough units to serve the village

itself and outlying farms, and they had come down from Alkmene to set up the system and see to it that it would perform as it should. Nestor couldn't afford any public embarrassment. But he made no apologies for singling out Segilla

"They deserve this," he told Kalla the evening before. "Given what they've been through."

And given that they had faced it alone, Kalla thought.

Segilla had suffered under Kyros because of its association with the family of the last Patriarch to bear the Andros name, but its farmer-warriors had fought back, refusing to surrender their arms, and had rallied the militias from the entire surrounding Marakes theme under strategos Andreas Katsulas.

They had abandoned the village, leaving it to be burned again, as it had been burned by Festus a century earlier in his war against Feodor. They had lived off the land and slept in makeshift shelters, but they had survived.

*I know that I **couldn't** have helped, without showing my hand, without risking the family,* she reflected. But that was scant comfort.

The people of the village and the theme had harried Kyros' forces and disrupted traffic on the Great Northern Road, inspiring the people of other themes along the road to Nesalonika to do likewise. That may well have forestalled an advance on the city and, beyond it, to the Northern Reach...

Segilla was a different kind of village after the Restoration. It wasn't just that the buildings were new, along with the lightning power system that served them. It was that the people had changed – they had accepted a new way of life and new values. They

now honored Flavia and Eusebia, just as they honored Kalla, and took pride in the role they were playing this day in the world's further progress.

Andreas himself welcomed the Patriarch and his extended family, introducing Nestor's kin one by one, beginning with his parents Rulav and Eusebia and continuing with Symeon and Flavia, Isidoros and Justina and Alexios and Petronia – and Candida. Nestor had somehow persuaded her to attend; she was polite but distant. But none of the grandchildren were present – the Patriarch had explained that this was an occasion for those who truly *knew* Segilla.

Eusebia and Flavia were getting on in years now, but delighted in finally getting a chance to take their bows, which they did – to much applause. Kalla was called on only after everyone in the family had had their moments, being introduced as an “honored friend” of the family – she drew cheers for that. But Andreas reminded them all the solemnity of the occasion, and the need for rededication.

“In years not long past, we lived to fight, and fought to live, and some of us died,” he said solemnly. “Today we can live instead to learn, and teach, and ensure that our children and our children's children never have to suffer war as we did. Let them inherit plowshares rather than swords.”

He paused for a moment to wait for the reaction. People in Segilla weren't all that religious any more, but they recognized the reference.

“Let it even be so,” intoned Modestos Palamas, praetor of the village elders, who was also kentarchos of its militia unit. He had obviously been cued beforehand.

“*Uruku steel* plowshares,” Andreas now added.

That relieved the tension, drawing laughter, and then cheers from the crowd. It was also a cue for the groundside Indrans to take their bows. Everyone in Segilla knew the value of their steel in plowshares and other farm tools, and in construction of the steam harvester that they shared with other nearby villages in the theme.

Nothing that strong was needed for the farcallers, but producing the components and assembling them was still too sophisticated an operation for the groundsiders to set up on Andros, although they had been instrumental in upgrading the planet's foundries to manufacture uruku steel for projects that called for it.

Sanjay Gandha spoke for the groundside Indrans. He was one of the few left of the original contingent; nearly all the others had departed a year before at very same time the Alkmene complement was replaced.

"I could have gone with them, but I wanted to see this work completed," he said. "And I wanted to work with Ioannes in preparing you to take full advantage of farcalling, and farspeaking to come, by teaching how they have brought people together on Indra, and will bring them together on Andros. Lastly, I wanted to be here on the day and the hour that you, the people of Segilla, first enjoy the fruits of our labors, and your own."

Ioannes Laskaris took a bow, but said nothing. He and his wife Eirene, whom he had met while in hiding on Gregoras, were familiar figures in Segilla from the days that Nestor's education program had brought him to the countryside, introducing teachers trained at the Academy and texts newly printed at the capital.

As Minister of Science, Alexios Komnenos spoke at length about the progress of technology generally and farcalling in particular – not just the community system, but the greater sabdabuvai system to come that would sow words across the world. It went over

the heads of most of the villagers, but they sat through his many words with great respect as befitted his station. By the time he finished, it was time for a meal break.

There was a festive air to the mid-day meal. The fare was all locally produced, from the salted smoked pork called apaki to the fruits and vegetables, cheese, whole grain barley bread, and himmas – a legume introduced generations ago at the behest of Kalla herself after she had read about it in scientific texts supplied by the Scalantrans. To drink there was Konditon, a wine flavored with cinnamon, cloves, black pepper and muskroot...

Kalla herself spent the meal with Ioannes and his wife. She had a past with the archigos of rural education, but it was only a past – something she had gotten over and that he had... survived.

It was well that he had found love before learning about the fate of his students at the Academy after she had rescued him, Kalla thought – otherwise, he might well have been overwhelmed by survivor guilt. Eirene had seen him through the horror of it. It was another bitter memory for her, another failure – although, as in the case of Segilla, she didn't know how she could have averted it.

Eirene understood that, and was grateful to Kalla. She and Ioannes kept in touch with her, and she was one of the first to know that they had a daughter and had named her Kalla. That might raise some eyebrows here on the Romanian continent, they knew, but they weren't about to brook any argument.

"I think they may actually understand better on Gregoras than here," Ioannes told her during a break for lunch during the ceremonies. "They value the autonomy Feodor granted them, and hardly anyone there ever supported Kyros – even though they're still conservative about religion; some of them practically worship *you*."

That led Kalla to blush, for more than one reason.

“We’re hoping to return for a visit soon,” added Eirene. “We haven’t been back for two years. It’s a long voyage by ship. I wish they still had the *Sky Climber*.”

“Sometimes I do too,” admitted Kalla. “But the Indrans say they have a better way. It’s a matter of physics. It has to do with the configuration of wings and the flow of air around them. But there has to be a motive power for the vanes that propel the craft – one lighter and more efficient than steam engines. They have engines that burn what they call saraba, which is what gives wine its effect – only in pure form. Not something to drink.”

Ioannes seemed a bit flustered.

“I really should study such things, I suppose,” he said. “But my primary interest is in literature, and I have been studying some of the epics and plays of ancient Hellas not mentioned in our *Suda* which I have managed to obtain from the Scalantrans, who told me they have them from the Olympians – Homer’s *Nostoi*, Aiskhulos’ *Niobe*, to give just two examples.”

Kalla didn’t find this sort of thing terribly interesting, but Ioannes kept at it.

“The gods of our remote ancestors were hardly admirable; in *Niobe*, they killed a woman’s entire family out of spite. I suppose Christianity was actually an improvement, although I think we’ve progressed beyond it... of course, Eirene would beg to differ.”

Eirene did, but Kalla’s mind wandered. Her thoughts turned to the Galen, who had created her kind. Long before that, they had created the Olympians – who, it was said, had assumed the roles of the very gods who figured in those ancient texts. Had they really been so arrogant and cruel, even worse than the Aureans? And what of the folly of the Velorians?

She couldn't speak of such things with Ioannes and Eirene. She couldn't speak of her own troubles and regrets and misgivings with anyone on Andros, even Nestor – especially Nestor, who had his own challenges to deal with...

It was the Patriarch's turn to speak after the meal, and he made a point of being frank. The villagers already knew the story of his family's escape to Ethrata, and the necessity for that, but Nestor wasn't one to let himself or the family off the hook.

"I stand before you today to honor those who stood by us when we were unable to stand by them," he began. "I would that it had been otherwise, and can only promise you that from now on it *shall* be otherwise. I am here to dedicate the farcalling system, but I am also dedicating myself to you and those like you throughout the realm – to be not only your Patriarch but your Protector."

*Protector, thought Kalla. Even I cannot be that. Not against what may come. May it not be in his lifetime; perhaps not even in mine. But I can't tell him about that. I **can't**.*

"I could go on at some length about what the future holds, but you have already seen some of it come to pass – the looms with which you turn flax into linen for your trousers and tunics, the steel fermentation tanks for your wine, the tools for carpenters and smiths that enable them to do their tasks better and with less effort. You shall see more of the same in the years to come. But for now, let us celebrate."

Nestor took a farcaller and pressed a series of buttons. A sound something like a bird call could be heard from the building facing the village square in which the praetor and the elders customarily met. Out stepped three musicians and the koryphaios, the leader of the dance.

As the musicians took their places in front of the building with lyre, tambour and flute, the koryphaios stepped into the square, and the villagers formed a circle. As he called out the movements, they danced intertwined with one another, breaking the circle occasionally to hold their hands high or wave them to the left and right.

The formalities were over, but the informalities were just beginning. Over the next few days, bird calls multiplied in the village and surrounding farms as the people played with their farcallers – even when they could have easily just gone next door or a short distance away to say whatever they had to say. What the birds made of it, she couldn't imagine. After a while, she imagined, things at Segilla might settle back to something close to normal. Only it would be a *new* normal.

“It was good to reconnect with the people there. And with my own past,” Kalla told Nikos after flying back to Nesalonika. “Nestor even promised to have the Ministry of Trade work with Segilla and communities like it to offer Konditon and other specialty wines from across the land at the next trade fair. Speaking of which...”

She opened a bottle of Konditon she'd brought with her, and they drank to each other's health – among other things. Those other things included the social progress on Andros.

“It's good to know that women like Eusebia are being honored,” Nikos said. “I was a young man when lightning power came to this city, but I remember having heard her name in connection with it – not as loudly as I heard yours, of course, but I knew she'd been involved in the planning.”

But there were more new things to come, and not all of them would be met with such welcome...

Chapter 5. Signs and Portents

When the *Bountiful Voyager* returned next year, on its outbound journey, Kalla carried an elaborately inscribed copy of Nestor's appeal to the Guild of Air and Space Transport Engineers, which she entrusted to Kumar. She also brought a message for Jaleel on Fujiwakoku, which she handed to Pakiula.

"It concerns the murder of Dr. Hayama Tofky during the reign of Kyros. We are greatly distressed by this, and we can well imagine that his family and the people of Fujiwa will be even more greatly distressed. But because Jaleel is familiar with the language and culture, and has experience as a *murasaki*, she may be able to express our sorrow and regret better than anything I could write. That is what I beg leave to ask of her."

"I'm sure your thoughts will be well received," the historian said. "The Patriarch... was this his idea?"

"No. It simply occurred to me that it might help forestall any future problems with Fujiwakoku should we ever need to call on them for their understanding and support. It also has to do with Androssian politics – while I bear no responsibility in the matter, I thought that it might serve to... ease the situation here."

She explained about Candida, but then quickly moved on to other matters. She already knew that Nestor's appeal would be well-received on Indra. What she didn't know was whether the Guild would manage to indenture a new Companion. There were six candidates on the ship; she had no idea which might be most suitable – assuming the match could be made.

“Amiela seems to be the most intelligent,” Pakiula told her. “I would introduce you to her and the others, but we have been instructed by the High Council not to allow any contact between the candidates and old Companions.”

“Perhaps you could—”

“We *could*, but it might encourage loose talk among them, and possibly get back to Velor – the High Council wants new Companions to report back on what they see and hear. I think the Council and even the Senate must be worried about what’s happening out here, but they don’t want us to know how much – or to address any specific issues unless it’s unavoidable.”

What she heard from Pakiula about the reaction on Velor to news of the Aurean War and to the problems of Velorians on the other seeded worlds was equivocal at best and deeply troubling at worst.

It wasn’t just that the Senate was trying to increase exports of Companions – that was only to be expected, given what Kalla had learned from the historian during the ship’s inbound stop. It was Velor’s silence on other matters...

The High Council had been advised of the tragedy on Ulakinil, but had sensed an opportunity to indenture Companions to both factions there – only with a “clarification” that future Companions could not be ordered to attack one another, or the Scalantrans.

“So they could still murder Terrans at the will of their masters,” Kalla snapped. “This is madness. And what if those one Companion is ordered to murder are protected by the other?”

“They don’t seem to understand that,” Pakiula remarked. “They don’t appreciate the kind of reception we’ll get on Ulakinil, either. Whoever rules there now may not want to trade with us at all after what happened to Rasasingan.”

“That would be ‘bad for business,’ as they put it,” Pakiula said.

“But what do they have to say about the Aureans?”

“Regarding any future threat to our ships, they told us that they are ‘taking the matter under consideration,’ while reminding us that we had only ourselves to blame for any hostility on the part of the Aureans.”

“Un-nicely put.”

“And yet they themselves have acquired their own spacecraft, capable of flight between Velor and Erin’lah, where they now maintain a base – officially only for training Companions to protect their holders against domestic enemies, but we believe it is also for some sort of military force.”

“We never had any training of any kind, beyond what we learned about pleasing men while growing up on Velor.”

“None of the training they’re doing now is supposed to have anything to do with the Aureans,” Pakiula said. “Neither is their independent space capacity. That’s still the official line. They obviously don’t trust us. But we can’t trust them – not when it comes to the war.”

“It puts me in a difficult position, especially since I can’t share any of this with the Patriarch.”

“At least we can count on Liessa. She is fully informed.”

“And whoever becomes her new partner.”

“Indeed. Fortunately, the social structure of Indra is advanced enough to allow for indenture of another Companion. We can thus accommodate the wishes of Velor without creating... complications. The same can be said for Fujiwakoku and Siguo, but we do not believe those worlds are ready to take to space, let alone be informed about the possibility of war. As for the others... we may have to make the best of a bad deal. To avoid trouble with the Senate. It pains us.

“It pains me, too. But I suppose there’s no escaping it.”

At least she didn’t say out loud that she doesn’t consider Andros “stable” enough for another Companion...

“None. Not for my generation, in any case. Perhaps the next...”

She gestured to her tlax. She was expecting.

Chapter 6. Upward and Outward

The dedication of the Farspeaking Tower four years later was the greatest event on Andros since the accession of Nestor, and the crowds that gathered at the site outside Feodoropolis numbered in the tens of thousands.

Few in that crowd could see their Patriarch at the podium, and fewer still would have heard his words, or those of other dignitaries on the stage, were it not for dozens of receivers arranged around the tower in concentric circles. Other such receivers had been delivered to towns and villages as distant as a thousand stadia. But that was the whole *point*.

More than 500 feet tall, the tower could send sounds to receivers all over Andros – not just by line of sight, but by reflection in the upper atmosphere. Like visible light,

invisible light came in many colors; some of these were reflected and some not. Kalla, who watched the ceremony from far back in the crowd, had been vaguely aware of all this as a young girl on Velor, but hadn't given it more than a passing thought.

Science Minister Alexios Komnenos, however, had given the technology a great deal of thought, having taught physics at the Academy and subsequently been enlisted to work with the Indrans on practical applications for Andros. Today he shared the stage with the Patriarch, the other ministers, First Speaker Mousoulis of the Great Synod; Nestor's father Rulav, Deacon of the Academy, and – of course – the Indrans from the Guild of Resource Engineers.

Nestor himself set the tone of the speeches to follow.

"Today, we bring the far corners of the world together," he declared. "It is part of our new era of peace and prosperity, of reaching out to each other, and even to worlds and peoples beyond our own."

Sabdabuvai, the Indrans called it – sowing words. But here it also meant sowing ideas, and even sowing hope. Nothing could ever be the same after today, and this was only the first use of the Farspeaking tower – in the days and years to come, it would become a global source of news and education. Ordinary citizens, moreover, would be invited to farcall the government to offer comments – and ideas of their own.

Kalla didn't mind being left out of the ceremony, although she had played a role in construction of the tower, helping raise the uruku steel girders and put them in place for the construction workers, veterans of the wind-vane power stations, to anchor with bolts – that phase took a lot of hands. It was also part of her job to catch any worker who might

slip, and otherwise fall to his death. There'd been some close calls, but none calling for her intervention – the men were good at their jobs.

Alexios had been there now and again to oversee construction; he wasn't really needed, but wanted to see the progress with his own eyes. Sometimes he had brought his nephew Alexius, who had studied physics at the Academy but wanted to learn more than he could find in books the Scalantans had brought over the years. Those books had to be learned by rote – for their world lacked the scientific and technological base to study the ultimate nature of things on its own.

* * *

"It's called gomansa masala," Kamana said. "It's made from beef."

It was later that afternoon. The speeches had been made, and most of the crowd had melted away. The senior Indrans had also called it a day, but she had been sought out by Kamana Desai, who knew the family history better – having had to hide out with Nestor and his kin at the old Keep in Ethrata after piloting and then abandoning the *Sky Climber*.

Cattle on Andros had traditionally been used mainly to draw plows on farms, and became a cheap source of meat only if they died from accident or old age. Lamb was favored here, followed by poultry and pork.

"Do you really eat meat from draft animals?" Alexius asked.

"Not draft animals. We don't even use draft animals any more. We have powered vehicles on our farms as well as our roads. But in the land of Bharat, where our people came from, killing and eating cattle was forbidden. It was a religious law. But we put that

behind us, along with other things – like the realms of business and politics being left to males only.”

Alexius still looked dubious.

“Just try it,” Kamana insisted,

“Yes, try it,” Kalla added. “I’ve had it on Alkmene. It’s heavenly.”

So he tried it. And his face lit up at the taste of the beef and exotic spices.

“A true gift of the Heavens,” he said. “Like your people. Like the Scalantrans. Like Kalla...”

Kalla was used to this sort of thing. Alexius had had a crush on her when he was a boy. But she knew by now that he and Kamana were lovers, and that Alexius calling her a gift from the Heavens wasn’t meant as a come-on.

“Alexius is too modest about his own gifts,” said Kamana. “He knows a lot more than he lets on. He’s been talking to me about geognosis – that’s the study of how all the aspects of a world, natural and human, relate to each other.”

“Geognosis?” Kalla asked, startled.

“That’s what he calls it. It seems to be original with him.”

“Somebody, somewhere, must have made it up before,” Alexius said modestly, “It has to do with the resources of a world, and how they’re used, and how each world’s social and political institutions govern that use. Andros has been fortunate in that; lightning power has come earlier than on some worlds – and from wind and water and the sun rather than burning anything besides swamp gas. Even so, steam power for transport and much industry depends on burning wood. Our forests are still abundant, but we

should take care to avoid wasting them, or turning too much to black rock or rock oil. The Indrans have found ways around that, or so Kamana says...”

“He’s studying the history of other worlds, including ours,” Kamana broke in. “Not to mention space travel. He’s going beyond geognosis.”

Kalla didn’t want to get into that – not with Alexius, at any rate. Fortunately, it was time for Nestor to make another announcement.

It was a lottery, open to high-ranking Academy graduates whose studies and/or subsequent work centered on resource development. The winners would get to visit the Indrans on Alkmene. Rulav had given his enthusiastic endorsement, and the formal announcement would come the next day.

“I wonder how he thought that up,” Kamana mused.

It was my idea, Kalla almost responded. But it wouldn’t be proper to claim the credit, which properly belonged to Siguo.

She glanced toward the Farspeaking Tower, which rose like a spire from near the trade fair ground. She had last been here the day of its completion, and she knew that its purpose was to bring a brighter future. *May that future truly be bright*, she almost prayed.

As if the others had read that thought, though not the thought behind it, Alexius and Kamana joined her to stroll to the tower and stand beneath it. She gazed upwards, thinking of distant Velor – a world she would never see again. Even if it were possible to return, she thought, she knew that she was needed here. Not for her original purpose, as seen by the Senate and the High Council, but *needed* just the same.

The sky above was mostly cloudy, but there were a few breaks of blue; and he must know that, beyond the spidery web of steel, beyond the blue, lay Alkmene, where in

due time he would join the Indrans. Could Nestor and his people here be wondering whether they might reach beyond the moons?

They couldn't have any idea why they might one day *need* to.



Chapter 7. Awe and Shock

Over the years that followed, Kalla got used to carrying winners of the lottery to Alkmene. But it was always a new and unsettling experience for the winner himself. And when he got there, things could get even more unsettling.

There was the gravity, to begin with – less than a third that of Andros. The air outside the station was far too thin to breathe, even if it had had the right mix of gases –

you needed a protective suit and bottled air, but it hardly seemed worth the trouble to go outside anyway: the landscape was bleak and, of course, utterly lifeless.

The winner might know what would see, but not how it would *feel* – or how it might make him think and feel about himself. And he would almost certainly be nervous about the climax of his visit – an intimate encounter with Kalla herself. It might not part of the official program, but he'd have heard about it – it would have been the talk of the Academy.

Yet for young metallurgist Menas Xiphias, whose number had come up this time, one of the strangest things was that the Indrans called him a Terran. Where he'd been born and raised, nobody used that term.

"I've never thought of myself as a 'Terran,'" he said. "I know they taught me at the Academy that any humans of old Earth origin are called that – by the Scalantrans, at least. But still..."

Androssians and Indrans alike were Terrans – no matter that neither had ever seen the ancient homeworld of mankind or had any idea what had become of it. Even the Scalantrans never visited Earth; the Galen wouldn't allow it.

Menas would soon be working with groundside Indrans at the foundry producing components for Farspeaker receiving stations. He already knew that they had a strong tradition in metallurgy, having brought the secret of uruku steel from the Gupta Empire in the Terran land of Bharat – a secret they now shared with Andros.

In welcoming Menas, Akash, regaled him with the story of one of their legendary scientists, Aryabhata.

“It was he who calculated the value of pi, and the formula for determining the area of a triangle,” she said. More to the point, Aryabhata realized that heavenly bodies like Earth’s moon were spherical and shone because of the light they reflected from the sun – and that Earth revolved around the sun and rotated on its own axis. He had used that knowledge to predict solar and lunar eclipses.

“We had to learn all that from the Scalantans,” Menas confessed. “And now... I feel as if I’m on trial here,” he confessed.

“Far from it,” Akash reassured him. “Your people are good learners. Look at how far your world had come since Basil. And you yourself are an honored guest of the Guild of Resource Engineers. As Kalla has been from the start. All of us here are working to the same end.”

Menas appreciated the honor, but it still added to his discomfort because, as he told Kalla, the station itself was a letdown. Even with the expansion, it was cramped and utilitarian. He had trouble relating to the Indrans, whose very names he had trouble remembering, and whose behavior – he could overhear them, including Akash and his second-in-command Lalita Johar, in the throes of passion – came as a shock to a young man from a conservative rural family.

“Don’t they have any sense of decency?” he asked Kalla.

“You have to understand their perspective,” she explained. “They’ve giving up a good part of their lives to work with us. They have a strong sense of duty towards each other and towards the Guild; the first Indrans here had to build the station from scratch with sections fabricated on Indra and shipped here, just as they had to assemble their spacecraft in the cargo bay of the *Bountiful Voyager*. They actually had to live on the

spacecraft until they could put up the station, and produce breathable air from local ice to make it habitable.”

“But surely you helped them,” said Menas.

“Only in small things, like helping weld some sections in place. And, of course, I had to provide transportation to and from the ground for them, and for shipments of sun gas and other resources. I had to get their groundside people off the planet in a hurry after Kyros came to power, and the crowding was even worse then. They had to expand the station with materials fabricated from moonlet iron. It’s a lot easier for them now, but it still isn’t a vacation, and they deserve whatever comfort they can find in one another.”

Four of them didn’t even share the limited comforts of the station that day. They were busy at a cavern several stadia away, mining ice for fuel to power the spacecraft. Tomorrow, others would take the spacecraft moonlet-hunting, and be gone for several days. Here at the station, most were busy at things monitoring the hydroponics tanks – the source of most of their food and essential to replacing stale air with fresh. They had little or no time to socialize, and left it to Akash and Lalita to deal with Menas.

Knowing how things stood with the Indrans helped make up for Menas’ sense of inadequacy, and for the embarrassments and disappointments he had had to endure his first day on Alkmene – day in a figurative sense; despite its distance from Andros, the moon was tidally locked to its primary, and its day was the same as its orbit.

Embarrassments like bumping into the walls, the ceiling and even the Indrans because he wasn’t used to the lower gravity. Disappointments like Andros having been in half phase when he arrived, and his first glimpse of the bright half through the base telescope fixed on the moon’s southern horizon having been limited to the ocean that

covered most of the planet. Like his not having been able to see the stars during his first excursion outside the station, on account of the glare of the sun – and the fact that the faceplate of his suit had to be tinted in any case to avoid damage to his eyes.

“Maybe I’m not cut out for this sort of thing,” he admitted afterwards. “Maybe I’m just too clumsy to work here, if it ever comes to that.” As for the rest, “I guess I was just expecting it to be... I don’t know... more... magical...”

“I was just as clumsy when we set out from Velor,” Kalla said. “We all were. Only in our case it was the ship that suffered. Fortunately, we realized that it was because we had left the gold field, which limited our powers on and in the vicinity of Velor. We had to wear gold after that, just to be on the safe side, although I don’t think that was really necessary – we could have simply learned to be more careful... as you can.”

“I still have my bruises. And my head hurts.”

“They have a pain medicine here, derived from the bark of a tree called Bain. We really should have the Scalantrans bring us some, so we could produce our own.”

She asked Lalita for some of the medication, and that eased his pain, but not his mood. Still, he was able to talk seriously about finding ways to speed the output of steel gears and levers and other parts for commercial and industrial applications.

“We could use it to produce wind vanes for the lightning power stations and save Sidero wood for more creative use in homes and carriages,” he ventured. “We should better manage our forest resources.”

Had he gotten that idea from Alexius?

After talking things out for a while, he was feeling better, and she was of a mind to make him feel better still. When they returned from another excursion outside, Kalla didn’t

bother to cover her naked body – and struck a provocative pose for him after he removed his protective suit.

The Indrans had found gold on Alkmene, but had used it only for lightning power devices like farcalling units. But she could borrow enough to allow her to bestow herself on the lottery winners... It hadn't *exactly* been her own idea; she had told Nestor about Marzha's experience on Siguo, and he had thought it might be replicated on Andros.

"Not officially, of course," he had cautioned. "It wouldn't be seemly. In any case, you aren't any obligation. But it would be a pleasant surprise for winners of the lottery – who will have more to their credit than mere delusional fantasies – and it would be good for our program, without the Palace taking any official notice, let alone credit."

"Indeed, Sebastos," Kalla said in mock obeisance. She'd already asked Nikos, and he didn't have any problem with her sharing her favors – at least when they served a seemingly higher purpose. The only one with a problem on this occasion was Menas himself.

"I haven't had great fortune with women," he confessed when they were alone together – as alone as it was possible to be at the station.

When he had won the lottery, she had made a discreet inquiry, and learned that he wasn't known to be involved with anyone at the moment. She got the impression that he was too caught up in his work, too determined to prove himself as a metallurgist, to take the time for a relationship – let alone trouble himself with learning how to please a woman, instead of merely seeking release for himself.

"Your fortune is about to change," she told him now,

"They'll hear us," he protested faintly.

“They’ll be happy for us.”

“Oh God,” he cried.

As he slowly removed his clothes, his embarrassment in doing so was manifest: he had already come in his pants. That had happened before with lottery winners, and Kalla knew how to deal with it.

“I won’t tell anyone if you won’t,” she said. “And I like what I’m seeing.”

What she was seeing was his cock rising again to the occasion. But he was too close to the edge, and shot his load before he could get it into her. She knew how to deal with that too, kneeling to take him in her mouth and make him come again there as she sucked him gently.

“You taste so good,” she told him, and that did wonders for his morale; after his third orgasm, she judged from experience that he’d be past the hair-trigger stage. She invited him to lie back, and staked herself on him. As he filled her, he easily triggered her pleasure points and she came, shouting with joy, letting him feel her contractions. Let him think it was beginner’s luck instead of the natural response of a Velorian...

As Akash might have put it, he proved to be a good learner; and what he lacked at the beginning in skill, he made up for in stamina – a stamina that her pheromones enhanced. It was only when he was physically exhausted that he broke off, and that she let herself come down.

But their idyll was interrupted by a frantic call from Nestor:

“Alexius has had a serious accident at the estate. We need to get him to the hospital. Come right away.”

She left immediately, after a brief word to Menas; he'd have to wait a while for his own return trip.

Chapter 8. Fraternal Trials

Alexius, who had just turned 27, had been trying out a hand-crafted wing with a harness on a hillside near the Choniates estate. He'd taken a long run down the hill and then a jump – soaring a few dozen feet before a gust of wind upended the patang, as he called it, and sent him plunging into the ground.

Flavia was the only witness to the mishap, Symeon having been in the capital on business. But at her age, 56, there was nothing she could do to help, except to farcall the Palace. Nestor had in turn called Kalla – realizing that she could reach the scene faster than any rescue workers from the capital.

Alexius ended up with a broken left arm as well as a number of cuts and bruises. One of Symeon's men at the estate improvised a splint for the broken arm, and he and Kalla figured out between them how to turn the patang into a litter, using the harness straps to secure Alexius. Then it was off to the hospital, where she was met by Nestor himself – and by Candida, who had summoned her best doctors to treat her nephew.

"Maybe you can talk sense into him—" the Patriarch began to tell his aunt and Minister of Health, once the doctors had taken charge of Alexius.

But Candida interrupted him to speak to Kalla.

"I know I've been unfair to you in the past," she said. "I know how much you care for the family, as *family* – it's not as if Alexius is anything special to you."

Which indeed he wasn't.

“I began to realize that when Nestor told me about your having Jaleel break the news about Tofky to his family and people. I was terrified about how they would take it, how they might never understand what happened, might never forgive us. But they did, thanks to you. He was a brave man, braver than me, and I miss him desperately. But I can live with that.”

Candida embraced her, tears in her eyes.

“It’s all right,” Kalla said. “We can’t forget the past, but we can change how we feel about it. And we have to look to the future.”

“Indeed,” said Nestor. “We’ll have to get together more about that. But right now, we should talk about how to deal with young Alexius and his flying obsession. It’s a pity that Kamana is no longer with us; I’m sure she could have talked him out of this.”

Kamana Desai had been Alexius’ constant companion, lover and even advocate after the Restoration. But she had finally left for home two years ago. Her family back on Indra had been concerned that she was getting along in years – she was already in her late 30s – without husband or children. Like her fellow Indrans, she valued family; and because marriage to Alexius was out of the question, she felt she had no other choice.

Kalla knew she couldn’t contribute to the conversation about Alexius’ problems, even if she had wanted to, and decided it was time to take her leave.

“I’m needed on Alkmene,” she said. “Have to pick up that lottery boy.”

Actually, Menas could have waited a bit longer. But she wanted to inform Akash about what had happened here, and find out about patangs – could any use be made of them?

Patangs, the mukhiya told her, were flown for amusement. In Bharat, they had been used in competitions at harvest festivals. On Indra, they had once served a few practical purposes like testing the wind or sending messages – there hadn't been any farcallers back then. But they were deployed from the ground, using long cords – nobody had tried to fly with them. They were nothing like the powered aircraft later developed on Indra.

“He must have gotten that idea from Kamana,” Nestor said, when she returned to the Palace to brief him – after delivering Menas home. “Or simply read up on it, and let it go to his head. Like that thing about geognosis he was talking about at the Farspeaker dedication. He seems awfully full of himself.”

“He didn't read up on that in anything he studied at the Academy,” added Rulav, who had joined his elder son the Patriarch at the hospital. “He seems to think he needs to make a name for himself, instead of just living in your shadow.”

“Maybe it just comes of being junior brother to a patriarch,” Kalla said.

“He could succeed me as chancellor one day, if only he took teaching seriously. That should be enough for him.”

* * *

Alexius was released from the hospital a week later.

“I told him that if he fooled around with patangs any more, he wouldn't ever get to visit Alkmene,” Nestor told her. “And I'm not about to let him do that any time soon, in any case. Father is with me on this.”

“So what is he doing now?”

“Playing chaturanga. It’s a game the Indrans brought from Bharat. It’s played on a board with squares, and figures representing ministers and soldiers and weapons on two sides. The object is to capture your enemy’s pieces by moving yours from square to square against them according to the rules, and leave the enemy rajah unprotected so that he has to surrender.”

“They have it here at the hospital?”

“He had Flavia bring it from the estate. He’d been trying to teach the game to her and Symeon – and Constans and Damianos.”

Their two sons, the first named for his grandfather, later martyred.

“How did he get into it himself?”

“Need you ask? From Kamana.”

“Is he any good at it?”

“Fairly. He admits that Kamana humiliated him at first. But he doesn’t seem to mind; he’s a good learner. It’s a challenge for him, and he says he’s getting better; that he might even be ready to go up against other groundsiders before long.”

“Maybe he’s just trying to get on your good side.”

“Kamana was too... before she left for home. They stopped by the Palace once, and she showed us how to make an Indran dessert called faludeh. You take crushed ice and mix it with cereal and a blend of fruits and spices. Delicious! She thought it might catch on here. Of course, it couldn’t be shipped anywhere without a means to keep it frozen.”

“They keep a lot of basic foods frozen on Alkmene.”

“Maybe that’s another technology they could introduce here. There aren’t enough ice houses here for fresh fish and produce. I really should talk to Symeon and Flavia about that.”

“The other groundsiders might be able to advise you. If not, I’ll ask about it on Alkmene,” Kalla promised. “It *would* fall under the purview of resource management. I hadn’t thought of it until now.”

Too many other things to think about.

Like the indenture of Amiela to the Guild of Air and Space Transport Engineers on Indra – the guild they now needed to work with if they were to introduce aircraft and even spacecraft to Andros. Word of that had come with last year’s visit of the *Bountiful Voyager*, just like the message from Jaleel.

Kalla suspected the Scalantrans had somehow arranged for that Guild to submit the highest bid for her, given their own interest in the Indran space program. But Pakiula had coyly refused to either confirm or deny that suspicion. Instead, she had introduced her to her six-year-old daughter Bethara, part of the cohort conceived during the ship’s last outbound voyage.

Still, the ship’s historian had agreed to bear a message from Kalla to Amiela, in hopes that she could offer a more candid account of what was happening on Velor than the High Council was willing to share. In particular, Kalla wanted to learn how much the training for Companions had changed, and what they were being told about the reasons for it and the situation on the seeded worlds generally.

Not that it wasn’t important to keep in touch with Liessa, to whom she also sent a message. She still worked with the Guild of Resource Engineers, even though she was

now free. And, having lived on Indra for only two fewer years than Kalla had on Andros, she was on intimate political terms with the political and cultural establishments, and her insights could be invaluable.

She realized that her mind had wandered only when Nestor asked what she was thinking.

“About how unimportant our personal troubles are, in the scheme of things.”

“We can deal with them, at least.”

She could only hope that the Indrans and Scalantrans knew how to deal with the troubles nobody else here knew about.

Chapter 9. Strange Tidings

Nikos’ older daughter Nereida had come to visit him, and she was in a bad mood as they got ready for dinner.

“Valens was honored as first speaker in his class at the Academy, and I had to miss it because of the Scalantrans,” she complained. Nikos’ younger son Valens was studying economics, and Nikos made a point of traveling there for the occasion. His older son Belisarius and younger daughter Ariadne both lived in Feodoropolis, so they hadn’t had a problem.

It was three years later, and Kalla was back living at the villa after her latest stint on Alkmene – which meant she too had to listen to Nereida’s rant. She worked for the transport ministry, and was currently posted in Boreapolis, capital of the Northern Reach – keeping track of steamwheeler traffic, making sure that papers for vehicles and their cargoes were in order. But there was more “to order” these days.

“Up to now, we’ve only had to keep track of ranched versus wild pelts,” she said. “The Scalantrans target them at different worlds, and different markets thereon. But now it seems there’s a demand for shinefur with unusual patterns or color harmonies, and most of the ranchers have taken to sub-grouping pelts accordingly. But some haven’t figured it out yet, or sometimes the tanneries don’t separate them and...”

“It must make your work harder,” Nikos said.

“I have to certify that each bundle is categorized and identified correctly,” Nereida said. “The Scalantrans don’t want to be bothered with that, not with the volume being so much greater than even a few trade fairs ago. They want even less to be bothered when they’re also dealing with greater shipments of wine, olive oil and other local products. And with another fair coming up, I was *held up*.”

Nikos commiserated with her, and Kalla tried to lighten things up a bit.

“Would you rather be certifying Konditon? You’d actually get to try it.”

“I’m not sure I’d be good at that. My taste isn’t terribly sophisticated.”

“Well, would you like to try some now, with dinner?” Nikos asked. Kalla has good taste, and she has been educating me.”

That helped. Nereida even laughed.

“She’s been educating you in a lot of things,” she said slyly. “She’s been good for you, and I’m happy for both of you.”

“Nikos has been good for me, too,” Kalla said. “Better than I could have imagined when we first got together.”

She took his hand and squeezed it gently, a promise of things to come.

Dinner was a matter of lamb, whole grain bread, pulses and greens, prepared by Nikos himself rather than his household staff, which had been given the evening off. He prided himself on putting out for his children when they visited; they all had homes of their own by now. Belisarius and Nereida were married; Valens, like Ariadne, was still single.

After-dinner conversation turned to anything newsworthy from the Reach that might not have made the newssheets.

“As a matter of fact, we had a bit of excitement just before I finished up this week,” Nereida said. “One of Ennodios’ personal staffers had mysteriously disappeared, the factiones told us, and the catapan was really upset about it. He’d ordered a search in and around Boreapolis; his men were even asking steamwheeler drivers if they had booked any passengers or been approached to do so. None had.”

At the mention of the catapan of the Northern Reach, Kalla suddenly had a bad feeling, and it must have shown.

“Is something the matter?” Nikos asked.

“Just a delicate political matter. Between him and the Patriarch, I can’t go into it.”

“Some other members of his staff were murdered by agents of Kyros, in the last days of his reign, or so the story goes,” Nikos said. “Ennodios has been taking care of their families.”

And keeping silent about the truth, Kalla thought. But she decided to divert Nikos’ attention.

“When it comes to political murder, I trust that we are done with that. But it hasn’t always been the doing of madmen. I can remember when, a century ago, Feodor killed a

priest he caught raping a woman. The priest thought he'd been within his rights, but the Patriarch thought otherwise."

Not the entire truth of what happened and why, Kalla reflected. But his outrage was true enough.

"Did men really think rape was all right in those days?" Nereida asked.

"It was mostly a matter of pretended authority among lesser nobles and clergy, who wanted to feel more important than they actually were," Kalla said. "It wasn't as if women were legally considered to be property, even of their husbands."

"You yourself were Feodor's property in all but name," Nikos observed.

"And yet he never treated me that way. In any case, it was my own world's doing. I can't honestly say that Velor is any more enlightened than Andros."

"Still, you are free now, by Velor's law, and recognized as such on Andros by the Patriarch."

"My experience may not be typical. Jaleel served the family of a lesser noble, not the actual ruler of Fujiwakoku. You already know about Liessa on Indra, indentured to a Guild rather than a potentate. On yet another world called Siguo, the ruler sold chances on the favors of his Companion Marzha to raise money for public works and—"

"So that's where the idea for the lottery here came from!" Nereida broke in.

"It wasn't quite the same on Siguo. There, it was mainly an alternative to taxation, and it was open to anyone who bought a ticket or tickets. If Marzha liked a winner, she could invite him back to her bed as often as she wished – as long as she lay at least once with each winner. Once each is enough for me; otherwise I save myself for..."

"As I said. You're free now," Nikos said, beaming.

“And enjoying every moment of it,” Nereida added.

Every moment with Nikos, at least. Could he enjoy those moments as much if he knew what I have to deal with?

Just then, her farcaller rang. It was the Palace, but not on family business. There had been an accident at the steam car races, and three drivers were trapped in or under their vehicles.

Kalla flew to the capital as fast as she could, and was able to pry open the cabs of two of the steam cars and lift up the third to enable emergency workers to rescue the drivers. The factiones had her to fly a litter to the hospital with the most seriously injured man, the one freed from under the third car. He might not make it, but she was his only chance.

Palamas, the man in question, didn't make it. The other two recovered but, she later learned, not enough to return to racing. That was just as well, Kalla thought; she'd never cared for steam car races – and not just because Kyros had encouraged them. They appealed to the baser impulses, not only on the part of the drivers but on that of the gangs cheering them on – and sometimes turning to violence against each other. She'd read of chariot team supporters back in late Roman times even rioting against the Emperor.

Still, she'd done her best in a bad situation, and the news sheets took notice. She began to be called out for other emergencies, like rescuing people from fires and floods and, occasionally, criminals. It worked wonders for her public image. It also meant she had to be sure her farcaller was always within reach, just in case of some emergency,

It had been within reach, of course, when she had been visiting Alkmene again – strictly work, nothing to do with the lottery. That was the only small consolation when Nestor farcalled her with the worst news she had ever heard: Nikos was dead.

Chapter 10. Pain and Sorrow

It wasn't the first time Kalla had carried a Patriarch to the catapan's villa, nor the first time she had flown with Nestor. And it wasn't the first time she had made the flight during a political crisis. But it was the first time it involved a murder.

"I couldn't tell you before," Nestor said when they met at the Choniates estate. "It was murder, and it was connected with... what you told me about Ennodios. The killer committed suicide, but he may have left a note. The factiones saw that, along with both bodies. They knew that you were involved with Nikos, so they called me. I advised them to do nothing and say nothing. We have to keep this contained."

Kalla was overwhelmed by a sudden realization of what must have happened – and then by a sudden pang of guilt.

"I should have *thought* of it," she cried. "I should have *known*."

And she related what Nereida had told her and Nikos, over a year ago, about the man who had vanished from Boreapolis. At the time, she had thought that he had likely defected – and that Ennodios had been afraid he might reveal the truth about his plans for a coup. But no such revelation had come; she surmised that the defector had been found... and silenced. She had put the matter out of her mind, and hadn't given it any further thought since.

Nikos had been stabbed in the heart, and bled out on the floor of his study. The knife lay next to him. The young man who killed him had evidently poisoned himself; an empty flask was lying nearby. An envelope was clasped in his right hand; he must have planned that as a gesture, just as he had planned the manner of his death.

“They were found this morning by the household staff, which had been given the night off,” Nestor said. “They immediately notified the factiones, who haven’t disturbed the bodies, and were planning to summon a physician in any case before doing so, but I advised them to wait outside the villa with the staff until I told them otherwise.”

Kalla noticed there were some papers on Nikos’ desk. Apparently he’d been busy writing something when he was attacked. But she wasn’t in any mood to look at it now.

“We’d better look at the note,” she said instead.

Nestor sensed she was loath to touch it, or the hand that held it, and took the hint by doing so himself.

He tore open the envelope; the note inside the envelope was only two sentences, which the Patriarch read out loud:

“Vengeance have I long desired, and vengeance have I now. This is the only way I can hurt her. She will understand.”

Kalla understood – and broke down in tears. Nestor did his best to comfort her, but to no avail. He had to wait her out.

It seemed to take forever, but at last Kalla came back to practical reality.

“Did he sign it?” she asked, in a voice that sounded tired, although as a Velorian she wasn’t supposed to be able to feel tired, save from superhuman exertion.

“Balfur Rossi,” Nestor read.

"The son of Stefanos," Kalla cried. *"It must be."*

"Nobody was supposed to know about him," Nestor said. "Except for his catapan. Except for the younger man you spared. Except for us. Ennodios assured me that none in the families of the others were told."



“Balfur... must have found out somehow, felt that his catapan was... *betraying* the men who had served him. Betraying his own honor.”

“There was never any honor in what Ennodios was planning.”

“And there was none in what I did. It was just that I could see no other way out. Even if I had told him at the time that you still lived, I don’t think that would have made any difference. And so I did what had to be done. But actions have consequences, they always have consequences, and we have to live with them. And now I have to live with *this*.”

“I forgave Ennodios. It was a hard thing to do. You have to forgive yourself, hard as you may find it.”

She heard the understanding in his words, and saw it in his eyes. Nestor was not the “mere boy” Stefanos had called him. He was coming into his own as Patriarch.

“And now we have decisions to make, actions to take.”

“We destroy the note,” he said. “We tell the factiones and the family we have no idea who this man was, or why he chose to murder Nikos.”

“They’ll wonder how he knew Nikos would be alone and unguarded.”

“And we’ll tell them we can’t imagine.”

“Just between us...”

“He must have asked around,” Nestor said. “He would have been looking for you, and found out about Nikos. You may not have been flaunting your relationship, but you weren’t keeping it secret, either. We could ask around ourselves, but what would be the point? Shaming innocent people for answering seemingly innocent questions? Once he

knew about Nikos, he could have kept an eye out, taken note of who worked here, their comings and goings – and yours. Strictly a matter of patience.”

“Nikos was always content to live here,” Kalla recalled. “He’d have felt lost in that huge estate Jayar built. He didn’t want to engage in idle chatter with officials, or to be waited on hand-and-foot. He conducted matters of state there, but here he wanted just a place to work and think and commune.”

“He was working on something last night.”

“I’d noticed.”

Together, they looked at the papers on the desk. The pages were the beginning of an essay about the rights of women, dedicated to Nereida and Kalla...

Chapter 11. Coping and Hoping

Kalla still felt numb, but hid it well enough to get through the funeral for Nikos. His children were still in shock, knowing only that their father had been the victim of a crime that seemed utterly senseless.

There had been a hasty inquest that failed to solve the mystery. Nothing much was known of the perpetrator. He had been seen in the neighborhood, and worked at odd jobs. He had given his name as Abramus Nepos, and claimed to be from a remote village called Baruta in the far east of the main continent – but a farcall to the strategos of its theme had found no trace of his existence there.

That was, and would remain the official story. Only Nestor and Kalla would know otherwise. If the factiones had cause for suspicion, they would keep silent, given that the Patriarch had taken so obvious a personal interest in the matter...

Because they were on the scene, and to spare the Makropoulos family, Nestor and Kalla took charge of making the funeral arrangements. They had to wait a few days for everyone to assemble.

Belisarius arrived by steamwheeler from the capital, where he held a junior post in the Ministry of Trade – he had worked with the Scalantrans for the first time at the trade fair a year earlier. With him came his wife Eudokia and their children – Andronikos and Joannina, a toddler and infant, respectively: too young to have any idea what was going on.

Arethas Sarantenos, like his wife Nereida, had a job with the transport ministry, only it had to do with the enforcement of safety inspections for the vehicles themselves, and he traveled a lot – often making surprise visits. They'd put off having children. As for Valens, he was still at the Academy, studying new applications for lightning power; he too came from the capital.

There was more to it than the religious service; Nikos had never been particularly religious, but his office was bound by custom. There was more to it than interment at the Strymon government center just outside Nesalonika that had once been Jayar's private estate. And there was more to it than ordering a headstone: a modest one; Nereida had insisted that would have been in keeping with her father's wishes.

"For me, it's a matter of state," Nestor reminded Kalla afterwards, out of earshot of the family. "I have to deal with the succession as well as the ceremony. Belisarius, as the oldest son, is the only choice as acting catapan. But he is young and inexperienced, and some might therefore consider it prudent to consider an older relative, or even an outsider, as successor."

“Young and inexperienced.’ What Ennodios thought of *you*,” Kalla couldn’t help adding.

“I can’t help remembering the essay Nikos had been working on that night... and its dedication. By all rights, Nereida should be a candidate for catapan. But that is out of the question. The Synod would never consider it, and Androssians in general would never approve. Women may have a strong voice in the Family Council, but our family is an unusual one – thanks in large part to your influence over the generations.”

Kalla wasn’t in the mood for flattery, and simply nodded.

“Perhaps things will have changed by the time Libanius succeeds *me*,” he added.

* * *

Kalla returned to her work, because it was important work and she felt a sense of obligation. She brought sections of the solar furnace to the foundry, where Menas was now working, and before long it was turning out uruku steel components for wind vane generators.

And yes, uruku steel plowshares. Well, plow blades...

Nestor had made a point of having the first lot earmarked for Segilla, and Kalla herself saw to their delivery. For a flying woman to descend from the sky with a load of humble and yet valuable goods was a sight to behold, and it was soon the talk of the farspeaking commentators.

There had been still other signs of progress, from the first steel highwheelers that ran on saraba produced from sugar to an Academy educational outreach program that allowed young men and women in far flung regions of Andros to take advanced courses without coming all the way to Feodoropolis.

She brought more lottery winners to Alkmene, and their visits climaxed with the customary reward. She welcomed the relief on a purely physical level; it helped ease the pain of her loss, but she didn't expect to find true intimacy again – not any time soon. Yet there were other things on her mind – and also something on Nestor's...

Part Two: Love Found and Lost

Chapter 1. An Unexpected Journey

"You don't have to treat him like the lottery winners," Nestor told Kalla when he broached the idea of sending Alexius to Alkmene. "I've put off allowing him to go for too long now, because I didn't want it to seem that I was granting him any special favor."

"People will believe that anyway," Kalla said. "And say it."

"But he's behaved himself, going on seven years now. And he's still talking about space... maybe this will get it out of his system – you keep telling me that Alkmene is usually a disappointment for the lottery boys, except for..."

Kalla only nodded.

"Neither you nor I owe him *that*. And he certainly hasn't had any trouble finding women here. Being the brother of a patriarch has its advantages."

But at the time she finally started out for the moon, neither she nor he had given thought to the advantages Alexius would have with the Indrans. Like having learned the language – at least the basics – from Kamana.

“Danyavada, mukhiya,” he responded to Akash when he was welcomed into the station. It meant “Thanks, headman,” he told Kalla afterwards – but it was more than the Indran had expected, and got their relationship off to a good start.

“Your pronunciation is slightly off, but you are welcome.”

Alexius’ expression showed his delight.



But it turned out there was more to it than that.

Even though he had no more experience of the lower gravity on the moon than the lottery winners, he had managed to avoid their clumsiness. He must have imagined how it would feel, practiced it in his head. Whereas most previous visitors, moreover, had quickly become bored with the moon's landscape, seen through the window, Alexius was entranced – he couldn't wait to suit up.

By pure happenstance, the sun was about to set when he ventured outside with Akash and Kalla. Andros was a mere sliver of a crescent, and the stars beyond it shone forth in all their glory.

"Now we can see the entire universe!" he exclaimed.

And to Akash, "Can you point to Indra's star?"

Akash did so as best he could.

"It's the small star next to that really bright red one," he explained over his suit caller. "The red one is closer, but it doesn't have any planets... and accordingly doesn't have any wormhole connection."

"Do you know anything about the origin of the wormholes?"

"No more than what the Scalantrans tell us, and have doubtless told you, that the Old Galactics established the network – eons ago, long before there were any humans or, as far as we know, any Galen. For that matter, any Scalantrans – but the Galen were here when *they* arrived."

Kalla too had suited up, although she could have gone out naked, in order to be able to follow the conversation – and also to avoid sending the wrong signal to Alexius. But he himself, without realizing it, was sending a signal to her, in his exchanges with

Akash about the universe and its history and their place in it. He wanted to know more about the Seeders, and how they chose which worlds to settle, and with whom.

Akash was somewhat abashed.

“When our forefathers were taken from Bharat, they didn’t ask such questions,” he said. “At the time, they didn’t know there were other worlds like ours; it wasn’t until the Seeders departed and we were contacted by the Scalantrans that we learned about them. And the Scalantrans weren’t terribly forthcoming, I imagine it was the same here.”

“They never mentioned the Galen, or Velor?”

“Not until the *Bountiful Voyager* brought Liessa. And even then, they treated it as simply a matter of trade. It was Liessa herself who had to fill us in, as best she could. I get the impression that Velor itself hasn’t been terribly forthcoming.”

Kalla sensed it was her time to join the conversation.

“The Scalantrans didn’t even know about our... capabilities until after we left the gold field,” she said. “Neither did we. They, and we, had thought that our destiny was only to be paramours, and that we would be freed of that obligation only by old age – assuming any of us still lived at all after a hundred years.”

She’d never talked about that with Akash, and it must also be new to Alexius.

“It’s been an education for you,” the mukhiya ventured. “In more ways, I imagine, than you could have been prepared for on your homeworld.”

“We were all young then, in our teens. We didn’t really know that much about our own history – and virtually nothing about the rest of the universe. I was the only one, I think, to make a point of finding out. Once I was indentured here, I had only intermittent word from or about Liessa, and none at all from most of the others.”

Until the after the Restoration, of course.

“Can you see Velor from here?” Alexius asked. “Velor’s star, I mean?”

“It’s far too distant, far too faint.”

“And it once would have seemed far too insignificant. And yet it is the key to... so much that I need to understand better, that we all need to understand better. I’ve always believed that there is a new history in the making because of Velor – and wondered if the Galen themselves might have a hidden role in it.”

If only you knew. If only I knew it all.

But before she could think of a safe response to that, the sliver of Andros in the sky above them vanished and they were plunged into darkness, except for a faint light from the single window in the common room of the station behind them. They turned on their suit lights, which cast an eerie light on the rubble-strewn surface ahead of them, enough for them to avoid stumbling on any of that rubble on the way back.

Kalla never did come up with anything to say about the Galen, but the next day – not the same after sunrise, which didn’t take that long – it happened to be time for the Indrans to head for the ice cavern to replenish the fuel supply for their ship.

And Alexius wanted to go along.

“I’ve never *really* flown before,” he pointed out. “And I couldn’t see out when Kalla ferried me up here.”

It was just a short hop for the spacecraft – not like going moonlet hunting, Akash pointed out. But there was room for him aboard, just barely, and the mukhiya was willing to go along with his whim, as long as he didn’t get in the way of the operation. Kalla could tag along, of course, under her own power. She hadn’t bothered to do so before, albeit

the process – breaking down the water into hydrogen and oxygen for fuel and breathable air (If the latter were needed) was familiar to her.

Alexius, however, was struck by wonder.

“To create the stuff of life from a dead world,” he said, knowing that the station – including its hydroponic tanks – was dependent on the cavern and its processing unit. But it was only after they returned to the station that he told her what had transpired on the spacecraft.

“I told them I wished I could learn to fly the ship,” he said. “They said they didn’t have the time, and couldn’t see the point. After all, it’s the only spacecraft in the system, and it can’t even land on Andros, let alone take off. When could I ever fly it, even if I did know how?”

“Perhaps you’ll have a chance to fly aircraft,” Kalla said. “If we can learn to build them.”

She paused for a moment.

“And I don’t mean patangs,” she added.

“I promise,” he said.

There was a smile on his face, but also something else, *Very* else.

“Only, I won’t give up hope of flying spacecraft someday, or learning more about the universe in which they travel – its past and present and even its future. I want to see other worlds. There’s so much I want and need to learn, and do. If only I have time. Can you understand? Remember geognosis? I want to go beyond that, with *you* – into what we might call Cosmognosis.”

They looked into each other’s eyes at that moment, and *it happened*.

Chapter 2. A Passion Born

“I need you,” Kalla said.

“I’m not really a lottery winner,” Alexius said. “You don’t have to—”

“I said I *need* you.”

She could see how much he wanted her; his cock couldn’t lie – she didn’t even need her tachyon vision; it showed through his tunic. That came as no surprise; it was impossible for any heterosexual human male *not* to. What surprised her was how much *she* wanted it. She could have *any* man, yet she wanted *this* man – desperately. She was already wet between the legs; a moment later that was showing through her tight-fitting chemise.

It would have been invitation enough, even without her pheromones, which had kicked in without her thinking about it.

Alexius hastily unbelted his tunic, then pulled off his own chemise. Kalla had only her chemise, not having bothered putting on her tunica today; she quickly cast it aside. But he had caught up with her in the time it took for her to take out and put on her gold necklace.

Alexius took her in his arms and began to kiss her passionately, while his hands roamed up and down her body, covering her with caresses. He obviously knew how to take his time, but she didn’t want him to. Not today.

“Enough!” she cried. “I want you inside me, *now!*”

Her wish was his command. She lay back on the floor, gazing up at him for a second, and then he was on her and in her – filling not only her womanhood but the aching need she felt.

She remembered Nikos, and how he had been taken from her, and the pain that had brought her. But only for a moment; as Alexius drove into her, his relentless thrusts drove away the pain. She was overwhelmed with pleasure, pure and unalloyed, and as he she felt him come inside her she came herself, screaming loudly enough to be heard all over the station.

No sooner had he withdrawn than he was all over her, squeezing and kissing and biting her breasts, then moving southwards and cupping her ass cheeks as he ate her out, sipping her juices as if they were fine Konditon wine. She shuddered in delight and came again. There were other tricks he must have picked up from the Kama Sutra – as taught by that Indran woman he'd kept company with... she couldn't recall her name at the moment; she was too busy enjoying them. She came again, and again

Alexius was still hard after the fourth time she came, and she wanted him to know how much she appreciated that.

“On your back!” she ordered.

He didn't hesitate, he knew what must be coming, and his eagerness showed as much in his eyes as in his cock. She looked into his eyes as she straddled him and then engulfed his cock.

“Watch me take you!” she shouted.

Their eyes were locked on each other as she began to ride him. His gaze might wander to her breasts as he squeezed and teased them, but kept returning to her face:

to the proud look of a living goddess having her way with a man – but a way any good man would have prayed for. He exploded inside her and she too exploded.

And so it went, and came for both of them.

“You’re a very educated man,” said Kalla, the afterglow showing on her face.

“I had a good teacher.”

“Do you miss her?”

“Not any more.”

She knew that this had been just the beginning... and it wasn’t just because he was good in bed, but because of the kind of man he was. He wasn’t like the other men of Andros, whose focus – however enlightened – was strictly on their home planet. He thought in a new way; he wanted to go places and do things. Perhaps she could help – but that meant being honest with him, in a way she dared not with anybody else, even Nestor. Could she confide in him? Would she?

Of a sudden, she decided to tell him about Nikos. The true story. Including her guilt over it.

Alexius looked at him gravely when she had finished.

“Does anyone else know this?”

“Only Nestor, and Ennodios; even they don’t know all the details. I don’t know whether the catapan had anything to do with Balfur coming after Nikos. And I don’t want to know. For the sake of Andros, the less we know of what anyone else knew or knows, the better. You can see that, can’t you?”

“I can see that you’ve suffered for having tried to do the right thing, trying to be loyal to the Family in face of both Kyros and the Northern Reach conspiracy. And then for

losing a good man who had nothing to do with it. I take it you never told him about the plot to put Ennodios on the throne?”

Kalla simply shook her head. The lingering pain was still there, but now she could share it.

What else can I share? she wondered.

Chapter 3. On the Learning Curve

A few weeks later, back on Symeon’s estate, where they had continued to share in their communion of bodies and minds, Alex had something more playful to share.

“One of the other things Kamana taught me,” he said. “Chaturanga.”

“That’s the game Nestor told me you were playing at the hospital.”

“A few matches with Flavia. But Constans and Damianos are a lot better at it; they have the advantage of youth.”

Is that supposed to be a joke? Kalla wondered.

“So how old is the game itself?”

“It goes back, oh, five hundred years or more,” he explained. “It was inspired by the kind of wars they fought in ancient Bharat. The object is to entrap your opponent’s rajah, which can be moved only one square in any direction to escape. The lowest rank is that of the padati, foot soldiers who can advance only straight forward, one square at a time, and can be taken out by any of the other pieces. An Ashva, for example; that’s the horseman. The chariot is called a ratha; and the animal that seems to have a snake for a nose is a gaja; gajas used to be the primary means of transport—”

“The Scalantrans have been selling gajas to Fujiwakoku.”

“I can’t imagine what they’d want with them... anyway, there’s also the mantri, the minister. And he and all the other pieces can be moved from square to square only in very specific ways, and you have to think ahead about what you’ll do with your pieces and what your opponent is likely to do with his.”

Kalla nodded.

“It’s pretty complicated, but the ending is simple. It’s when the winner is able to put his opponent’s rajah under attack from all sides and there is no longer any safe square for him, or any way for the other player to take the pieces threatening the rajah.”

He smiled at her.

“Of course, you’ll be a virgin at this and—”

“So deflower me,’ Kalla said, and grinned mischievously.

Alex left for a few minutes, came back with a board, and set up the pieces.

But the game got off to a rough start, even though he took a good deal of time to explain the rules.



“No, *no*, Kal!” Alex exhorted her early on. “The *ashva* can advance either two squares forward and one sideways, or vice versa, in the very same move; it’s the *gaja* that can be moved only forward or diagonally.”

Kalla had already managed to get it through her head that *gajas* could jump over the first square and afterwards move only one square at a time, likewise that the *mantri* could move only diagonally, but...

“Perhaps the horses have a will of their own, rather than just obeying their riders. I might have known.”

She never doubted that she’d lose quickly, and she did.

* * *

It would take a long time for her to become good at *chaturanga*, and if that sort of thing had been all there was between her and Alex, Kalla would never have wanted to bother keeping his company.

But there was so *much* more between them now... and sometimes their intimate conversations could take strange turns.

“You look so *human*, Kal,” he said one night, as they lay in each other’s arms.

“*Huh?*” she reacted, arching her eyebrows. “What do you *mean* by that?”

“It’s not a what, but a *why*.”

“But *everybody* knows! The Galen took people from Earth and enhanced them.”

Kalla had already gotten him a copy of her illustrated history of the Galaxy, which she had persuaded Cherya to have published back in Jayar’s time, based on her own account of what they knew about it. It hadn’t told Alex anything he hadn’t known or surmised, and he wasn’t satisfied.

“But why from *Earth*? Why not from some other world, from an entirely different *species*?”

“I’ve told you before, Alex. They wanted procreators to replace their women!”

She paused for a moment.

“At least, that’s what the priests always told us.”

“So the Galen themselves looked human, were perhaps even related to humans? Only, *why*? Where did *they* come from, and how long ago?”

“No one knows.”

“And if they were so gifted at designing lifecyphers, to create people who looked like Terrans but were super-strong and invulnerable and could fly, and all that, how is that they couldn’t have recreated their own females?”

It was rare for Kalla to be struck speechless, but this was one of those occasions.

It had been a long time since she had thought about how little Velorians truly knew about their origins. Was there any truth to what they'd been told? Was there even any way to find out?

"I don't know," she finally confessed. "Even the Scalantrans don't seem to. They might never have known about Velor if it hadn't been for somebody on Ishtar using his influence to divert a ship from its established trading circuit."

Because she hadn't mentioned that in her book, she had to explain about Ishtar, a First Generation world of protos involved in the seeding of Second Generation worlds.

"Why the Ishtari were interested in Velor, the Scalantrans never learned, though they suspected the unseen hand of the Galen behind it. And the Velorians themselves thought the Scalantrans *were* Galen; that's how much *they* knew. The priests were still taking the old story seriously when I was growing up, and I took it for granted, even if it didn't make any sense to me. I don't know if there's been any change since."

No doubt Amiela would know, she thought. Only Amiela is on Indra.

Where she knew Alex would love to travel.

No chance of that!

Yet even Amiela would presumably know only what the Companions were being told. Kalla wanted to know more: the true nature and purpose of the Galen, who were known on Velor only in legend.

The Scalantrans had told her that the seeding program was an experiment; the Galen and their surrogates wanted to see what would happen if people from particular times and cultures on Earth were isolated on new worlds. Sometimes they'd mix two or more cultures and monitor the results.

Chances were it had been the same with the Ishtari and other protos, and even the Velorians. Were the Galen playing some elaborate game of chaturanga, with entire peoples as the pieces?

It was a terrifying thought, and Velorians were supposed to be afraid of nothing. But if she couldn't be afraid for herself, she could be afraid for others – it had been so with Feodor and the other Patriarchs she had loved, and then with Nikos and now with Alex....

Alex thought in strange ways. Perhaps he could help her find some way to the truth, or at least cope with not being able to find it.

But she'd have to tell him what she did know. *All of it.*

Chapter 4. An Expected Journey

Akasa kiyartri, Kalla thought. *Heavens travel*. That was what the Indrans called it.

She was standing outside the Choniates mansion, looking into the sky, trying to imagine Alex aboard the *Bountiful Voyager*. It was a journey that had been four years in the making, although neither he nor she could ever have imagined it at the outset of their relationship.

By now the Scalantrans would have taken him into the white room on their ship, and given him advanced deepteach in Indran; he would need far more than just the basics to get by where he was going. It would be another six years before she saw him again. She would miss him terribly, but they both understood why they must part, how important it was to the future of the world they shared.

Nestor and the family and Kalla had said their farewells at the spaceport before the *Bountiful Voyager* lifted off. They had known of his dream of being a flier for years; it went back to his childhood and the *Sky Climber*. At the Academy he had studied history, but also taken an interest in the actual design of aircraft and spacecraft – an interest he had pursued with the Indrans here.

Yet even his father Rulav and older brother Nestor had been taken by surprise when Alexius announced at age 37 that he wanted leave to travel to Indra. Nobody from Andros had traveled offworld, except to the Indran station on Alkmene and aboard the spacecraft based there – and none had even suggested venturing beyond the system.

Alex had visited Alkmene, only four years ago – that was when he and Kalla had fallen in love. He had learned much from the Indran expatriates there, but he knew that the heart and soul of the Indrans' space program was on their homeworld. He wanted to see it for himself. And he wanted to experience Indra itself. He felt an affinity for these people, who hadn't waited for the Scalantrans to give them advanced technology, but worked it out for themselves – like the ancient Romans on Earth.

Rulav had been annoyed when, at age 11, he changed the spelling of his name from Alexios to Alexius. He identified with the ancient Romans, who had invented great things and built great things, or so the Suda and other ancient texts told.

To be sure, the Scalantrans knew a great deal more about spaceflight than the Indrans, but their technology for interstellar travel, even had they been willing to share it, would have been too great a leap for a seeded world like his.

It had been a dream of Nestor's for Andros to one day master air travel and even interplanetary flight, to foster commerce on the planet itself and tap the resources of its

moons. It was part of long-term program to better the lives of his people. Yet there was a more urgent need he hadn't known about – but which Alexius had and did. Thanks to Kalla.

Despite that, he hadn't shared his decision with her until telling his parents and the Family Council. She hadn't been party to that, nor would she have sought to be. She knew it was not her place...

He'd broken the news to her when next they met, at the old Keep in Ethrata. He'd driven his own steam car to the old capital, farcalling her from there before walking the rest of the way.

"It's been a while since you carried me here," he reminded her, when they came face to face.

"Quite a while."

"I didn't know then if I'd ever be looking down upon the world from above, rather than at the stars from below. Or that I'd travel ever with the Scalantrans. Or... what we'd mean to each other.

"Nor I."

"I love you, Kal," Alex told her. "But this is something I knew I had to do. All the more so because of what you told me about the Aureans. But even without that, I could never have been happy with my life... or with our life together... having known only one world, when you have known two."

"You couldn't live long enough on mine to know it," Kalla reminded him.

"Right. The gold core. The gravity. Do you suppose anyone on Indra will have an idea why even one planet in one system, let alone two, should have a gold core?"

“I don’t see how, if even the Scalantrans don’t know.”

Velor had been one of his obsessions, along with the fate of the Old Galactics who had built the wormhole he would transit on the way to Indra, and much else about the Galaxy and its history. Kalla reminded him – as if any reminder were needed – of the importance of more immediate concerns.

“As for the Indrans, what we need from them is to understand how badly we need their space technology... and what they can do to help Andros build its own spacecraft.”

Alex nodded for a moment. The Scalantrans were still concerned about that, and had had nothing new to report on their last stop, headed for Velor, two years back.

“I only wish that you could join me,” he added wistfully.

“You know how much I’m needed here. And not only for ferrying people and their goods to and from Alkmene.”

She wasn’t a member of any of Andros’ emergency services, but she did respond to emergencies – his own had been one of them, after all. That was what brought them together.

“I’ll miss you terribly,” he said. “Will you wait for me?”

“I’ll still be here when you return.”

In six years... when the Scalantrans stopped here again on the return leg of their circuit. They can’t alter their trading schedule, even for a crisis.

“You know what I mean.”

He smiled a bit: a welcome relief from the gravity of the situation.

She returned his smile.

“The art of love, like any art, requires practice. You don’t want to get rusty. Nor do I. But for me, the lottery winners will suffice.”

“And whatever I learn on Indra, I promise to share with you,” Alex said.

“Liessa has a great deal more experience than I do, having been indentured to an entire guild.”

“But I’ll have more to learn from Amiela.”

About space travel technology, he means. And for me, about what’s happening on Velor and what it portends...

She had already known from Pakiula that there had been indications the Aurean Empire might be stirring plans against the Scalantrans, and even the Velorians. But they were vague, and Alex still seemed distracted by his own agenda.

“Perhaps she could shed light on a fundamental mystery,” he mused.

“What might that be?”

“Why are Velorians what they are, how can you truly be related to the Galen on one hand and Terrans on the other, why should Terrans be a model for—”

“Cosmognosis again!” Kalla interrupted him. “You can be insufferable.”

“Oh?”

“But also adorable, and irresistible.”

“Ah!”

“I think the occasion calls for a parting gift,” she said now. “The greatest gift I can give – and never mind what the Galen may or may not have intended!



Kalla quickly slipped out of her stola and let it fall to the sand. She was wearing a necklace from the Keep, with just enough gold – and nothing else.

“It’s not as if I’m leaving tomorrow,” Alex said, and struck a broad smile.

He began to undress only now, but he had already risen to the occasion.

They were at it, off and on, for six days – as if they could make up for six years' worth of lost loving into that time. And on the seventh, it was time for her to fly him to the spaceport.

* * *

Alex farcalled her from the ship, soon after it made a stopover at Alkmene and began heading for the wormhole. It took several seconds for his words to reach her, and they were for her ears only.

“Maim eka dura duniya ke li'e aba... ja raha hum. Mujhe lagata hai maim pahale hatha... sikhane ke l'le hai kya sikhana cahi'e.” he said.

Kalla noticed the hesitations.

“That means, ‘I am leaving now for a distant world. I must learn what I need to learn at first-hand.’ But I have to think ahead. It doesn't come naturally.”

“It will,” Kalla said, remembering her experience of learning Scalantran and then Romaic more than a century ago.

“So they told me. I'll be practicing on the ship – and on Indra itself. Of course, I'll be learning much else, some of it relevant to Cosmognosis – but I won't mention that to them.”

“A wise decision for now... Someday, perhaps.”

It would be six years before she saw him again, when the ship paid its next call, back on its inward journey to Velor. She knew that much, even if she knew nothing else about his future, or her own.

If only if she had known...

Chapter 5. Unexpected Arrivals

It was strange being part of history...

They were teaching history as part of the educational outreach program now, not just at the Academy, although it was still the Academy that determined how it should be taught and – more importantly – *interpreted*.

There wasn't yet a sanctioned interpretation for the very latest history – the rise and downfall of Kyros and the Restoration under Nestor – so the accounts taught at the schools, whether in books or farspeaking sessions, ended with Methodios, avoiding the “recent unpleasantness.” And Kalla's own part in later events was likewise passed over.

She was celebrated for her role in the Battle of Nesalonika, and for her work on the Great Northern Road, the Strymon River dam and other projects. But there was yet nothing in the official accounts about her rescue of the family from Kyros, nor of her final encounter with him. And even her role as a Companion to three previous Patriarchs was noted without any elaboration, as if it had been no more than a political matter.

People knew better, of course, or at least *thought* they knew better. There were those who had witnessed her role in the downfall of Kyros, and their accounts had soon spread – and sometimes grown in the telling. What had not been recorded in the history of earlier generations had become the stuff of legend, and even devotion – there was a cult in her name that had come into the open only with the Restoration, although it had roots far earlier: after all, to ordinary humans, she was a living goddess.

Kalla had scorned the cult, and yet she was playing the role of a goddess of love with the lottery winners. She remembered having read the Suda, the Romaic account of the lore of their ancestors on Earth. That too was doubtless a blend of true history and

mere legend. Or were the Greek gods and goddesses mere legend? The Scalantrans professed to know otherwise, to know of the Olympians who had once played a part in the affairs of a tiny country – Zeus, Poseidon, Athena, Aphrodite and the rest.

Some of the cultists, Kalla knew, identified her with Aphrodite – who was said to have shared her favors with mortal men. There were accounts of prostitutes in ancient temples devoted to her; had their clients fantasized that they were bedding the goddess herself? How many men here on Andros indulged in the same fantasies about *her*?

With the lottery winners, she was now playing down her superpowers – no more showing off with the solar furnace, or anything like that.

“I’m just a woman who loves to fuck,” she had told the most recent among them, a wind vane engineer named Cosmas – which meant order and even decency, although closely related to cosmos, which had taken on a different meaning. “It’s just that I’ve had a lot of experience fucking. And I love teaching young men like you how to fuck better – you’ll be in great demand back home.”

Although translations of the Indran Kama Sutra had been published on Andros, they weren’t widely read, and most men – especially from the countryside – thought it was sufficient to just stick it in and hump until they came. That could actually work for Velorian women – it was how they were designed inside. But for Kalla herself, there had been much more to learn, and now to teach – about wanton kisses and wanton words, the uses of hands and lips and tongues as well as cocks.

She was proud of teaching all that to Cosmas, teaching him how to caress and squeeze her breasts, to suck and nibble at her nipples and clit, to lovingly run his hands up and down her body, to revel at seeing her dripping with desire before finally plunging

himself into her and riding her to orgasm. She was just as proud of teaching him what a thrill it could be to see and feel a woman riding *him*. And the more he learned, the more they both came...

Back home, he'll take pride as a man in pleasuring a woman he can love as an equal, she thought. Pakiula had told her that on some worlds, holders of Companions' indentures shared them with their male offspring, to see to their sexual education. That would have seemed scandalous to the patriarchs here – not that it mattered any longer.

It must be far different on Indra, where Velorians had been indentured to guilds rather than potentates or nobles, as here and on Siguo and Fujiwakoku. That reminded her of Alex, and she could still get wet between the legs just thinking of him – would Cosmas be offended by that fantasy? She wasn't about to tell him – or any of the other lottery winners. She was a woman of principle as well as pleasure, after all!

Having done her good deed, and taken Cosmas back to Andros, Kalla turned her thoughts again to Indra.

I should learn more about the history of the people there, and not just their space program. I should have gotten deepteach in their language, as Alexius did.

Only she hadn't. So she prevailed on the groundsiders to teach her the hard way; the Indrans on Alkmene were far too busy during her brief visits there, and so was she – especially when she was accompanied by a lottery winner.

Jayadatta was senior among the groundsiders at that time, and he had brought a small library of classics from his world. Like the Romaioi, he revealed, the Indrans had a legendary history: the *Mahabharata*, an epic about gods and princes of ancient times, rather like Homer's accounts of Greek gods and princes – only much longer..

“No, I don’t have any idea whether Shiva and Vishnu and Brahma and the others were creatures of the Galen,” he told her early on in his office at the Wind Vane Trust – by sheer coincidence, that was where Cosmas worked, but Kalla made it a point *not* to renew that acquaintance. “And I can’t see that it matters millennia later.”

“I’m just curious, is all,” Kalla said. “About different Terran cultures and how the Scalantrans and my own people have interacted with them.”

“I *am* beholden to you for how you interacted on our behalf,” he observed, in a reference to the time of troubles that needed no explanation for either of them. “I’ll have some of my people see to your lessons – when they have time, of course.”

Jayadatta hadn’t been one of the groundsiders evacuated by Kalla to save them from Kyros, but he had met them later. Things had changed since the Restoration – he and other Indrans on Andros were on detached service from their Guild, and being paid by the enterprises they worked for here. Jayadatta himself was chief of technical staff.

Besides taking the Indrans to safety, Kalla had later saved the Wind Vane power plant itself from destruction by the forces of Kyros besieging it after the Patriarch himself had fled. History had been in the making that day, and it had taken some strange turns. It was there that Juliana Komnenos, future bride of Nestor but then only an engineering student at the Academy, had revealed the truth about the murders in her family – and where their actual perpetrator was hiding. It was there too that Giorgios Kalomalas, then a mere *komes* in the standing army called the tagmata, had led the defense of the planet by regular and irregular warriors – he was now *grand domesticos*, supreme commander of the armed forces.

Taking off for home after her meeting with Jayadatta, Kalla was reminded of how fully Feodoropolis had recovered since those dark days – there was no longer any sign of war damage, and the city was bustling with new buildings and new businesses. It was lunch hour just now, and crowds filled the streetside restaurants – many of which served exotic fare from Indra and other worlds unheard of in generations past. High technology wasn't the only import these days...

* * *

The *writing* was easy enough to learn. Indran was alphabetic, like Romaic. Once she knew the letters and their pronunciations, she could read their books – which wasn't the same as *understanding* them, of course, although she recognized the names of the gods and other proper names and everyday words she had picked up casually over the years – among them chaturanga.

She practiced that, as well as speaking the language, with the groundsiders – especially lightning power technologists Padmavati and Dodini, who both happened to be women, but were otherwise quite unlike. Padma was outgoing and talkative, Dodi shy and contemplative – she was the one who usually came up with the ideas, whereas Padma put them into action, and trained the Androssians in their use. The most recent example was a power unit that could be fabricated here and used in lightning power as opposed to steam vehicles.

"It's a more efficient use of resources," explained Dodi. "We don't use steam for most forms of transport at home any more, but the problem was finding a way to adapt the methodology for Andros."

“Your Patriarch believes in greater technological efficiency,” added Padma. “And he wants this efficiency to be *visible* in people’s everyday lives – that was enough to win him over, which in turn was enough to win over the Danelis Transport Group. They were eager to steal a march on any possible competition.”

Danelis? An old family, Kalla seemed to recall, but in a new enterprise. Not that she was terribly interested in surface travel as opposed to air and space travel. Late the next year, after she had become somewhat more fluent in the language, she borrowed what she was told was a standard account of what the Indrans called Heavens Travel.

The most important thing about the book was that it was *historical*. It told how a seeded world had managed to conceive and develop flight independently. It wasn’t just a matter of theory, but of hard-won experience. Kalla had heard inklings of this from the Indrans at Alkmene, and they could have taught her more – but they had a lot else to do.

The professors at the Academy here could help, but only on a theoretical level – the laws of physics that enabled space travel weren’t of any immediate use here, unlike the science and technology of resource management and communication, which was still the most immediate concern of Nestor.

Yet she wanted to pick up at least a bit of what Alex must now be learning first-hand on Indra – and there were surprising details. They had personal flying machines there: *uranagaris* – flying carts; or *ferounkaros* as they might be called here. These had to be extremely light, made of a material stronger than steel and yet far less dense – the Indran term, *nakali loha*, meant nothing to her – in order for them to be kept aloft by powered vanes.

“It means ‘imitation iron,’” Padma told her the next day. “There are actually any number of types, produced through processing materials like plant husks, rock oil and other living or once living compounds. We wouldn’t recommend the trouble or expense of developing rock oil, and for that matter we wouldn’t advise depending for too long on black rock for steam power or lightning power generation – on Indra, we use garbage, but Andros hasn’t advanced enough to produce an adequate garbage resource.”

This wasn’t what Kalla had wanted to know, and she didn’t want to know it now – garbage on an industrial scale a sign of progress? – but she thanked Padma anyway; it was always a good idea to be diplomatic.

It was still tough going with the book, but she was making progress – getting to a better understanding of the Indran culture as well as the technological thinking behind the leaps into the air and then into space. Their *Mahabharata* had made no distinction between the levels of the Heavens, and the Indrans had imagined at first that they could fly through the air to other worlds, if only their aircraft could carry enough fuel.

There had been a grain of truth in that, for some of the aircraft had been powered by reaction engines called pratikriyas – and sungas airships like the *Sky Climber*, built by them here, had been just a sideshow, according to the author, Vibhu Puri. That only confirmed what she already knew. Puri’s book was a few decades old, and Kalla knew that Liessa was later “borrowed” by the Guild of Air and Space Transport Engineers to test “experimental” spacecraft. And that Amiela was now working for that same guild...

* * *

Indra and the universe beyond might still hold surprises, but Kalla had assumed that she was beyond surprise when it came to Andros itself, and surely when it came to

the lottery program. Until the day she was told that the most recent winner was a young ground transport engineer named Verina Danelis.

Surely there must be some mistake, she thought. After all...

But there wasn't, she was assured by the Ministry of Education...

The official purpose of the lottery was to reward graduates of the Academy who showed promise in the field of resource development. And her own official role was only to take them to Alkmene and back, to give them the opportunity to exchange ideas with the Guild members stationed there, to become part of the program fostered by Nestor to bring progress to Andros.

But her unofficial role...

"Is she known to you?" she asked Padma.

"We know of her," Padma told her. "We've worked with her mother on lightning power vehicles."

Kalla only nodded, but she was wrapped in thought.

This was still a primarily patriarchal society. Yet certain aspects of Romaic law brought to Andros had given at least a few women a chance to engage in business: they had equal rights to bequeath and inherit property; married women maintained ownership over their dowries. Only in families that were propertied to begin with did that matter – most women were farmers' wives. That had begun to change during the reign of Feodor, and Methodios – if only out of necessity – had encouraged the entrepreneurial efforts of his daughters. But his family was still an exception to the rule.

The Danelis family was another exception; the foundation of its wealth was the silk business. Virgilia, whose husband had owned one of the great estates on Gregoras, had

loved silk textiles, both to wear and to adorn sacred objects in churches. But she had a talent for design, and her fashions soon became popular – if Siguo hadn't had a virtual lock on the interstellar silk trade in this region, she might have become one of the richest entrepreneurs on the planet.

Virgilia had been born on Gregoras, and had never even visited the mainland of Romania. But her children and grandchildren set up shop in Feodoropolis, and inherited her talent for innovation – they had even worked Indran motifs into their recent designs. And they had begun promoting their business with traveling fashion shows; that was what led to establishment of the Transport Group. It had occurred to Valeria Rhadenos, current head of the Danelis empire, that having her elegant traveling stages pulled by smoke-belching steamwheelers wasn't the best sort of advertising for their apparel, so when Nestor and the Indrans had proposed an alternative...

It was family tradition that the women, whatever their married names, headed the creative side of the business – the men saw to the strictly management side. That was the case with Valeria, whose husband Bartholomaios kept the books and dealt with all the routine chores, while enjoying the fruits of her labors. It was also family tradition that control of the Danelis empire didn't necessarily pass from father to daughter, but only to whomever the mother thought best qualified in the extended family.

Given that the empire was expanding its stake in the transport business – and *not* because she had inherited the original family name – Verina Danelis might be in the line of succession. Yet the core business was still the *core* business, she might instead be groomed to head the Transport Group one day... Still, she made a point of wearing one of the Indran-inspired designs when she met with Kalla at the Danelis complex.



“I grew up reading about you,” she said, right off. “I’ve always admired you, and I’m so glad we finally have a chance to meet.”

That was as surprising as her being a lottery winner to begin with, and Kalla said as much.

“Can *you* of all people think that only men dream of traveling beyond this world? This may be my only chance; I don’t think we’ll ever have the resources to venture into the space business. And I rather doubt that the Indrans are in the market for our stolas – not that, from what I hear, they aren’t flattered by where we found our inspiration.”

She went on talk more about that, and the lightning power vehicles – they would soon be used for bringing exhibitions to Nesalonika and even Boreapolis, she said. But she was eager to make the journey to Alkmene.

Another surprise: she wasn’t the least bit nervous about being carried there in a cargo container.

“Do you really think I can’t trust you to get me up there safely?” she teased. “After all, you’ve done it dozens of times.”

And when they arrived there, she was just as eager as Alex to venture outside and see the stellar sights.

“But Aunt Valeria could certainly improve on the designs of the space suits,” she commented. “I’ll have to study up on the technical side, so she’ll know where to begin.”

Only, would the Indrans be interested? Kalla wondered.

Verina managed to get in some flying time with the ice mining crew, although Kalla couldn’t imagine that being of interest to the Danelis business. Neither could the station’s hydroponics technology, which Verina also seemed to find fascinating.

But there was another interest she might take in her visit that remained unspoken – until the day before they were to return to Andros. Verina was so fulsome in her praise

and gratitude that Kalla could sense where she was going. But she took a roundabout route to get there.

“I was born when Kyros reigned,” she began. “It was a terrible time for our family, even though we had always steered clear of politics. It was *you* who saved us then, all unknowing, by saving Nestor and his family. Yet we couldn’t have imagined at the time that you would be our savior; we knew only that you had a certain... reputation.

“When I later read about you, and how much you had already done for our world, I learned how you had served as a Companion, and what that meant, and why you had to be faithful only unto the Patriarchs, even if you were not wed to them, and even if it was not in your nature.”

“It was in my true nature to love them,” Kalla said. “I never had any regrets. And I have none now.”

Except for Jayar, but this isn’t the time or place to mention him.

“Do you remember when you appeared at Mycenae, to humble Lord Pavel?”

“I do.”

“Virgilia was young then, just starting out in the silk business. She wasn’t in the capital to see it, but word spread like wildfire – about how a living goddess had shown her power and invulnerability in face of Pavel’s most fearsome weapons, yet spared him and our people at the end.”

“It was the right thing to do. Feodor had proposed it, and I had agreed.”

But Verina was too caught up in her account to comment on Feodor’s role.

“My great-great grandmother never forgot it, and she passed on the story for two generations – yet I didn’t know about it until I read it in the history they put out after the

Restoration. And by then I knew that you were a legendary lover as well as a legendary heroine, and had heard about the favors you have granted the lottery winners.”

“The answer is yes,” Kalla said, not wanting to disappoint her. “And it is true to my nature as a Velorian, although I have not had an opportunity to indulge in it here.”

She let her memories of her journey to Andros take over, but knew that she would have to make allowances for Verina’s nature, even after stripping down and donning her gold necklace. She saw that Verina was wet and ready,

Kalla was careful to be gentle with her breasts and, especially, her cunt – there, she let Verina be her guide in just how to use her lips and tongue to their best effect: Velorians weren’t all alike, and Terrans surely far less so. At first, Verina gave voice to her desires, but she later made passionate moans to let Kalla know that she was doing the right thing.

Now it was time for her to eat Kalla, and she was thrilled at the knowledge that she didn’t have to be careful – that she could let loose with a passion. Just as with her male lovers, it was a turn-on for Verina that her seemingly tenderest parts were invulnerable – but that she could bring incredible pleasure to them...

Which was what she was doing when the sound of shouting came from outside the room they were sharing.

They ignored it at first, just as they had ignored the sounds of Indran couples in their own throes of passion at other times. But then there came an announcement from Akash himself over the loudspeaker.

“Attention!” he shouted. “An interstellar ship is approaching for a landing. And it’s one of *ours!*”

He was speaking in Indran, but Kalla had picked up enough of the language by now to understand. And just in case she hadn't, he repeated it in Scalantran.



It was stunning. But even more stunning was what she and the rest learned a few minutes later: that one of the passengers was Alexius Tornikios. What startled her was that he was wearing nothing but a pair of shorts, showing off his incredible body.

“I see you didn’t want for exercise on Indra,” she teased, once they were alone together in her quarters. From his smile, and the bulge in his shorts, she knew what had to come next.

“Do we have time for...?”

“A quickie?”

“They have to get things organized for the briefing. But it won’t be *that* long. And the Indrans don’t have time to waste.”

“Then let’s!”

She could have practically dragged him back to her quarters, and he was all smiles as she stripped her own body of everything but the necklace.

Within moments, they were fucking like crazy, fucking against the clock, caring not for anything but each other. They were together again, whatever their world might face.

What else could the future hold for them? They had no idea – *then*. They couldn’t even have imagined it, knowing themselves only as they were now.

And Kalla could never have imagined what was to come once Azmi arrived to set up shop on the moon – with a contingent of a hundred Indran engineers. When he and Alex told her that they needed to have a conference aboard the *Naye Udyama*, she’d had to bid a hasty farewell to Verina, assuring her she’d be back as soon as possible to carry her home.

It would turn out to be a long wait for the lottery winner – three days. Not that she minded; she enjoyed her extended stay on Alkmene. What she minded was that Kalla wouldn't tell her anything about what was up, beyond the fact that it had to do with the air and space program. As if that weren't obvious.

The *Naye Udyama* – its name translated as “New Venture” – was nothing like the *Bountiful Venture* except in size. The ship's design was strictly functional, without any of the luxuries or conveniences the Scalantrans favored. Most of the space was devoted to storage of structural materials for the initial expansion of the base, and technology for mining and manufacturing to produce more of the same locally for further expansion. The Indrans had had to make do with cramped quarters and preserved food – most would continue to sleep on the ship until there was room in the *mula*, as the expanded base was called.

There wasn't a conference room suitable for a private meeting aboard, but none was needed.

“We are all fully informed,” Azmi announced at the outset. “By the Scalantrans, and by our Companion. Nothing we say today will be new to us, but perhaps Kalla will have questions we have not anticipated. Because our fellow traveler knows her better than any of us, I will defer to him to begin the briefing.”

Alex joined Azmi at the back of the feeding room, where Kalla also took a seat. The other Indrans were seated at their usual tables. Their eyes were all on him, but his were still on her. The Indrans knew what they were to each other, but he gave no other sign of that.

“It’s worse than we thought,” he said, without any preliminaries. “The Aureans are definitely expanding their empire, having recently annexed Agean, a world well beyond their home region. They even claim to have been invited by the Companion there, Liessa Ka Sar, but we have been unable to confirm this, as the Scalantrans have been barred from any further contact.”

He paused for a moment.

“For some time, Amiela told me, they had been waging a propaganda campaign against the alleged slavery of Companions. The High Council had been informed of this, but had dismissed it as mere morale-building for internal consumption. They now know otherwise, and so do we – thanks to her. It will take time for word to spread among the Scalantrans on other trading circuits, but Captain Vahirem agreed that we can’t afford to delay, given the strategic position of Andros on the *Bountiful Voyager’s* route. We must begin now to prepare – prepare for *war*.”

“How long do we have?” Kalla asked. “And when can we tell Andros?”

“We don’t know, and we can’t tell. Not yet. Only when we have reached, and can be seen to have reached, a position of military strength. Our object is to build that position. This is just the beginning.”

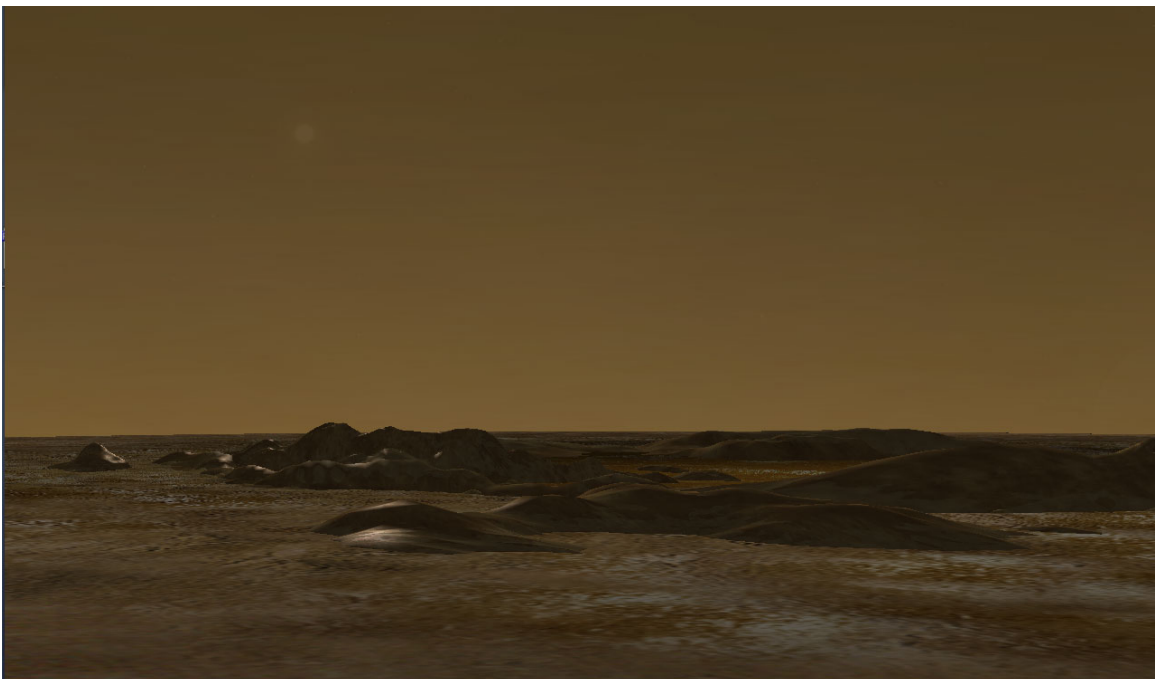
“But what can I tell the Patriarch about what the Indrans are doing now?”

“That any spacecraft they build here will be strictly for commercial purposes, to engage in mining and the shipment to Andros of raw materials and industrial products manufactured on Alkmene. That it is all part of the accelerated program of development for your world.”

“The Scalantrans themselves will cooperate,” Azmi added. “They will make their seeming displeasure with our growing presence known to the Patriarch, who can argue that his only interest is in further development of Andros’ own technology, including that for local air and space transport – that if we have any other ends in mind, they are not the concern of Andros and, in any case, beyond its control.”

It was a simple plan, but putting it into action would be far from simple, and that was what kept Kalla busy for the next three days. She had to be brought up to date on Indran space technology, on how spacecraft could be designed to serve commercial purposes and yet be quickly adapted to military use when the time came.

Other craft, designed as warships, would be manufactured at a second base on the opposite side of the moon. Nobody at home would see it – the original base of the Resource Engineers, now being expanded and shared by the two guilds, would be the only one to be visited by Androssians other than Kalla and Alex. Eventually, there would be other bases on the inner moons, Aoide and Adonia... but only for the military.



Chapter 6. A Secret Life

They were drunk with happiness in those early years, after the Change – but not so drunk that they didn't take care to conceal their secret. Only, as time went by, it was harder and harder.

Alex was 52, nearly a decade later, but didn't look it... He was rarely seen in public, or even at family gatherings; when he was Kalla did her best to make him seem older by cosmetically graying his hair. But there was no way she could age his skin.

He had retired from the Space Force after his accident; people could understand that he was afraid of flying after nearly dying, and that was what he and Kalla had given them to understand. They lived what seemed a quiet life together on their own estate, acquired after they became lovers; and with the revolution in communications there was little reason for them to appear in the Capital on government or family business.

* * *

"Who could we tell?" Kalla would venture soon after the Change.

"Who could we ask?" Alex said. "The Galen?"

It was a purely rhetorical discussion; they were too caught up in the excitement to think ahead. At the time, neither of them realized what might come of the Change in the long run. They could only count their blessings, as opposed to the frights that they had endured before, when Alex had been a test pilot.

Kalla had been terrified when word came of his first crash. She and Nestor had both given their assent to his flight. He wasn't playing with a patang, but piloting a small spacecraft of Indran design assembled on Alkmene under the supervision of Sarvesh Azmi, *mukhiya* of the local contingent of the Guild of Air and Space Transport Engineers

that had arrived with him four years before she had expected him back. He had come in for a hard landing; not *really* hard, or he'd have died instantly, but enough to break both his legs.

* * *

Androssians – men and women – would have to be trained as pilots and other crewmen and support personnel, and that would have to begin with aircraft; never mind that atmospheric ships wouldn't be of any use in the eventual war. A whole generation, perhaps more than a generation, had to be prepared – without knowing what it was being prepared *for*.

It would all be taken as by the public as part of the modernization program for Andros that Nestor had launched after the Restoration – and Nestor himself would be led to see it that way, and dismiss the rest as just a matter of the Indrans and their rivalry with the Scalantrans.

For Alex and Kalla, things seemed to be back to normal, and destined to stay that way. They had to worry about the threat of war, and how to deal with it – but they'd be just part of a larger community of Androssians and Indrans. The challenge might be bitter, but they could face it – as long as they had each other...

* * *

After that historic briefing on his return to Alkmene, Verina had shared the ride home with Alex and Kalla. They looked knowingly at one another, but made only small talk. Because Verina had visited Alkmene as a lottery winner, and the cargo container included – among other things – lightning power units for the Danelis Transport Group, Kalla brought it in for a landing near the Group's headquarters outside the Capital.

Verina was eager to show off the progress there, and even Alex was intrigued by what they saw on her guided tour, which included the latest model lightning power vehicle – the equivalent of a private coach.

“When I was a boy, the Indrans weren’t shipping anything here but raw materials like water gas for the *Sky Climber*,” he recalled. “But then they started helping equip our lightning power generation plants, and now it’s plows for farmers and solar furnaces for smelters and engine parts for highwheelers – only these latest models won’t need high wheels.”

“That’s why we’re calling them fastwheelers,” Verina responded. “Would you like to go for a ride? I could drop you two off at your place.”

It was a fast ride, and a bumpy one. Verina seemed to take it in stride, and so did Kalla – but Alex found it jarring, literally and figuratively.

“Do you have to rush like this?” he asked. “We’re not at the steamcar races.”

“I’m not really driving *that* fast,” Verina insisted. “It’s the *road*. It should have been graded better. Maybe even paved.”

“I’ll mention that to Nestor,” Alex said.

He had been watching the trees along the Great Northern Road speed by, while shaking in his seat, where Verina had secured him with a rope.

Kalla glanced at him.

“You’ve traveled faster in my arms,” she teased him.

“But there aren’t any bumps in the air.”

Something seemed to dawn on him just then.

“On Indra, the ground vehicles have cushions, filled with air, for the wheels.”

“We know,” Verina said. “But we’ll need to import the kind of plants that produce the raw material for them, and grow enough to meet the future demand. It takes time. First things first.”

Talking about wheel cushions distracted her; she had to brake suddenly when a steamwheeler loaded with produce entered the road from an adjacent farm – its driver must have thought he had plenty of time, and hadn’t made any allowance for the speed of the fastwheeler, the like of which he’d never encountered before.

The farmer was confounded, but also angry, and cursed at Verina. It might have been different if he’d recognized Kalla. Verina made her apologies before she detoured around him.

“First things first should mean keeping your eyes on the road,” grouched Alex, who had been thrown forward and might have hit the control board and been injured if he hadn’t been tied down.

Verina was properly abashed, and kept to a slower pace the rest of the way. It was just as well: there was other farm-to-market traffic to look out for, as well as long-distance freight haulers and passenger coaches. There was even an elderly fellow who was driving an old-fashioned highwheeler drawn by greatoxen.

“He can’t seem to learn new ways,” Alex remarked.

“Maybe he just can’t afford a steamwheeler,” Kalla said. “Our prosperity isn’t yet universal. But it’s true that people of his generation must have trouble adjusting to the pace of change. When you’re his age, the time you live in now may seem ancient.”

It had just slipped out; she realized too late that her words must have reminded him of how he would grow old and die while she remained young...

They were past the farms, and the traffic thinned as they reached open country a few stadia from their estate.



Alex had little to say the rest of the way home, but seemed relieved when they finally reached the turn-off. Verina insisted on driving them to their villa, then bade them farewell.

“We’ll have to see each other again,” she said – perhaps thinking of Kalla more than Alex. If that grated on him, he didn’t show it.

* * *

The villa was designed in the classic Romaic style, but it was modest in size, as it was never intended for more than two. Kalla and Alex didn't even have servants, but kept house and prepared meals for themselves.

It should have been a joyous homecoming, but it was strictly business at first – and not only because of what had transpired on the road. Alexius had serious matters to bring up that went beyond the personal.

“They're not letting the new recruits know what the Scalantrans have been telling the High Council,” he said. “They don't know about Jerusha or Rilanna – that suggests there may be cases like theirs elsewhere we don't know about. Nor the *Bountiful Voyager*. Pakiula is as troubled about that as I am. Their new trade captain, Shangrin, intends to take the matter up when they return to Velor – but he wants to consult with you first.”

“Is that why they sent you home early?”

“No, it was because I wanted to be part of the space program – here, not there. Otherwise, Azmi could have carried the message. But I was the one who got Amiela to open up, and I was able to do that because you'd reached out to her. It made sense for me to bring you word from her... and I missed you, of course.”

“I'm sorry,” Kalla said. “For—”

“It's all right, Kal,” he said. “It's not as if I'd never thought of it... it's no different for me than it was for Grandfather or those before him... only I'll have more time than they did. Let's not waste any of it.”

They looked into each other's eyes, and knew it was time to put off business for pleasure.

“Did you find Amiela amielenable?” she teased him.

“Not in the way you think,” he said, and paused for a moment. “But I don’t want to talk about that just now.”

Kalla could tell from his tone that he meant something related to Velor, and she quickly shifted the conversation to banter about Amiela’s sex life and why Alexius hadn’t been part of it.

“She’s quite strict when it comes to the terms of her indenture,” he explained. “Her favors are reserved for members of the Guild, and even they have to earn them – the membership runs well into the thousands.”

“Rather like the lottery winners here.”

“Not really. They’re chosen on the basis of achievement rather than potential, let alone mere chance... as you might imagine, they’re older and more experienced.”

“Lucky for them, *and* for her.”

“Have you been keeping yourself busy?”

“Only with the lottery winners. And they’re a very sometime thing. Although I have to admit Verina was the first of her kind. Only, maybe not the last. You?”

“Liessa, of course. But not as often as you might think... She has a... favorite. And there were Guild members, naturally. But only the unattached; I played by the rules... Of course, they’re younger and less experienced. Not that they were virgins, or hadn’t read up on how to please men...”

“I trust that you were a good teacher.”

“I kept in practice.”

“I’ve missed you.”

“I’m aching for you,

They were both naked, except that she had donned her gold necklace. Alexius had gotten rock-hard during their banter, and she was wet between the legs.

“You’re making me hungry,” Kalla said, and took him in her mouth. He exploded seconds later, and then took her in his arms and deep-kissed her, savoring his own cum as well as the heady feeling of lips on lips and tongue on tongue. He worked his way downwards slowly and teasingly, kissing her on her neck and caressing her shoulders and arms before playing at “finding” her breasts – squeezing them, then sucking and biting them until she screamed and shuddered as she came. After pausing to let her savor her orgasm, he teased her again, kissing his way down her belly before burying his face between her legs to kiss and lick and bite her clit until she erupted like a tiny volcano – and let him drink his fill of her fragrant juices with their flowery scent.

Kalla was wonderfully slick as he buried his cock in her and began to thrust with wild abandon, knowing that he could let loose with her as with no other woman – that no matter how hard he pounded her, he could give her nothing but pleasure. That made it an almost indescribable high for him when he came, and they came together again in every way they could think of before they took a break.

“I had gotten used to you, so I had to hold myself back with those Guild women,” he confessed. “They’re only human, after all. But knowing that you’re invulnerable, that nothing can hurt you...

“I can be hurt,” she reminded him. She didn’t have to mention Nikos by name. “It would hurt me if anything happened to you.”

“I’ll be careful with myself,” he assured her, with apparent sincerity. “It’s just that I know I don’t have to be careful with *you* – your incredible Velorian self!”

“*Enough!*” she exclaimed. “Put your hands and your mouth and your cock where you’re aiming your compliments!”

“Your wish is my command!”

* * *

In the afterglow, Alex returned to what he’d learned from the Scalantrans.

“It seems that on some worlds, at least those where the indentures are held by and inherited by individuals, fathers allow their sons to share the Companions’ beds as part of their coming of age – or as they put it, their ‘education.’”

“I’d already heard that from Pakiula,” Kalla admitted. “Feodor never mentioned anything like that. He would probably have thought it was against the rules – I certainly did. Or maybe he’d have considered it unseemly, on a world as conservative as Andros was – and in some respects still is. Anyway, I guess I missed out.”

“They also have ‘lottery boys’ on Erin’lah now. From some of the seeded worlds. To help future Companions with their ‘education.’”

“Any from Indra?”

“No. Nor from any of the other worlds visited by the *Voyager* – they’d never heard of the idea. Maybe there’s a reason for where they’re recruiting the lottery boys, but even Amiela doesn’t know.”

“Maybe we—”

But at that moment her farcaller tweeted. It was a fire in Feodoropolis; there were people in need of rescue in the upper stories, who were fleeing to the roof. Kalla didn’t bother getting dressed, just removed her necklace and headed out the door, into the sky and quickly out of sight – time was of the essence.

* * *

It was days later that Kalla met with Nestor to bring him up to date on the space program, and the role of the Indrans who had just arrived.

“Their first order of business will be to build a landing craft that can carry men and materiel here from Alkmene – and return. It’s a waste of time for me to be ferrying cargo containers back and forth.”

“Boring, too, I imagine... except for the lottery winners.”

“And they’ll get more out of their trips if they can ride in actual spacecraft, and get to see their journeys, from takeoffs to landings...”

“I’ll have tag along one of these days!”

“But the important thing is that the Indrans will be able to build aircraft as well as landing craft right here on Andros. Only their larger spacecraft will have to be built up there.”

Nestor was taken aback.

“What would we need those for?”

“Mining expeditions to the other moons and planets. Establishing colonies there. Eventually, interstellar travel.”

“Isn’t that the prerogative of the Scalantrans?”

“They’re thinking of going into competition with them.”

“As *traders*?”

“Indra has a very commercial culture. Some of their guilds could profit greatly by eliminating the Scalantrans as middlemen.”

Nestor couldn’t conceal his shock.

“They aren’t going to like it. They aren’t going to like **us** if we get involved. What if they cut us off?”

“They won’t dare. They can’t afford to. They’ll just have to compete for our trade in specific products, like rival business concerns here in the capital. In any case, if it comes to that, we won’t be ‘involved’ – we’ll just be bystanders. It’s not as if we could prevent them from using Alkmene; we don’t have any permanent presence there. And if there’s any question of the legitimacy of their operation, we could always lease rights to them in return for their support of our air and space program.”

“It’s something I’d have to put before the Synod.”

“Of course. But it would be best to wait until the landing craft is built, and makes its first landing. People will be able to see that the Indrans are in earnest in their support of your plans. Until then, I’d advise keeping quiet about it.”

Nestor nodded in understanding. Mission accomplished... but she felt a twinge of regret for feeding him the cover story. It might be necessary... for now. Yet it could cause no end of trouble in years to come.

Kalla had come to his private office to brief him, dressed for the occasion – in one of the Indran-inspired gowns Verina favored. It was more than just a matter of fashion, however; it was a reminder of the relationship between Andros and Indra, and the need to cultivate it.

The image she projected that day was nothing like the one she had shown in the Capital on emergency duty a few days earlier – the men, and even the women, trapped on the roof of a burning commercial building certainly hadn’t been offended to see a naked goddess coming to their rescue before the flames could reach them.

Her rescue work done, she'd been able to fly home to Alex as fast as she'd flown in. But today, it had to be a more leisurely trip both ways – it wouldn't do to risk damage to such a beautiful gown...

Chapter 7. Up in the Air

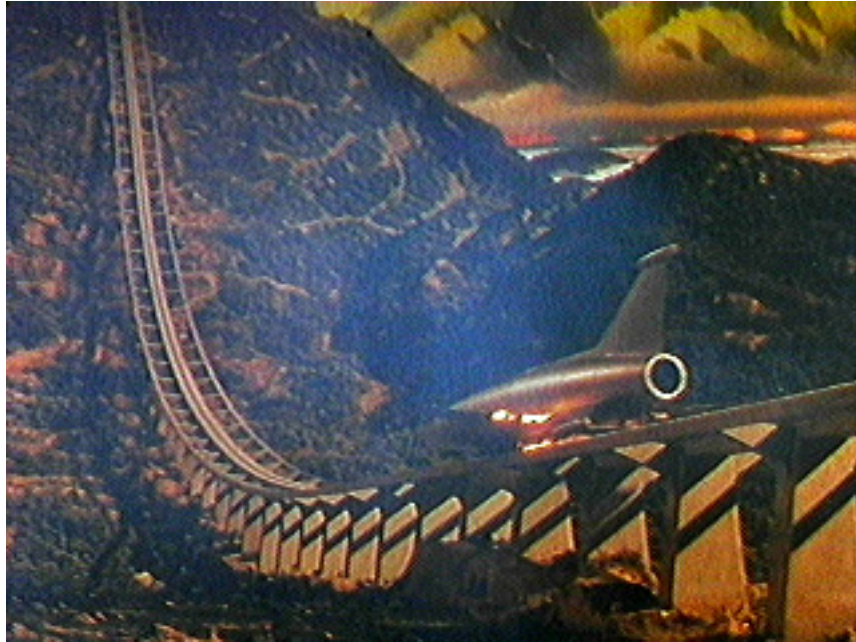
It was strictly an atmospheric craft, designed for the tagmata for use in aerial surveillance.

Alexius might be a test pilot for the Space Force, but he hadn't made it into space yet – except as a passenger on the landing craft. On the other hand, he was the only Androssian allowed to visit the base of the Guild of Air and Space Transport Engineers – and the only one allowed to know its purpose.

It was three years since he had returned from Indra, and the first ships of what was to become a fleet had been completed.

As far as anyone else besides Kalla knew, of course, they had been designed for strictly peaceful ends – not that anyone else from Andros could have divined otherwise looking at them from a distance. They could have seen that they didn't resemble the *Bountiful Voyager*, and that was that.

The *Rakhavali 1*, on the other hand, had been built here on Andros, at a complex next to the launching ramp in the Coastal Range from which the landing craft *Utara* made its return trips to Alkmene. The *Utara* wasn't large enough to generate an anti-gravity field like the warships but, in any case, the Indrans didn't want people here to know they had that technology – it was assumed to be a Scalantran monopoly.



The roar of the reaction engine when the *Utara* took off was deafening – a good reason not to have it operate anywhere near a populated area. Besides, it took heavy equipment to lift the massive craft back onto the track after it had landed on a stretch of paved road next to the complex that ran straight for ten stadia – no way could it be hauled across country.

Vane-driven aircraft could take off from and land on the same road; that was what Alexius would be doing. Indran pilots had already taken it up for short flights, and he had done likewise. But he'd wanted to be the first to make an extended flight – and Shazad Latif, head of the Guild's groundside command, had agreed. After all, the more familiar he became with the prototype Rakhavali, the better he could teach future pilots of the tagmata – which would doubtless change its name to some Romaic equivalent.

It was a heady experience – he'd felt free as a bird, soaring towards the peaks of the Range, then doubling back for a long descent into the valley east of the complex –

that would be the route to the future tagmata base, when the time came. Of a sudden, he realized there was a flock of birds ahead of him – he banked quickly, but a couple of them hit the vanes and sent his craft spinning. He fought for control and regained it, just barely; but the vanes were damaged and he knew he'd have to set down in the valley. It was a rough landing, but it could have been a lot worse... only a right leg hairline fracture and torn tendon this time, but he was checked in to the hospital for observation.

* * *

Kalla came to see him there as soon as she found out. They said he was still in pain, but he didn't show it; his attitude was chipper – he waved to her in greeting and, when she was within reach, pulled her in for a kiss.

"It will all work out," he assured her. "I'm sure Shazad can come up a device to scare away the birds when the surveillance craft go into service."

"You practically scared the life out of me! You could have—"

"But I didn't. And an Indran pilot might not have been so lucky."

Somehow, that didn't seem to comfort her. And when it was time for her to bring him home a few days later, it still didn't.

She was lightly dressed; only a stola and trousers, the trousers just for the sake of modesty if the stola blew away during flight. Both were the worse for wear from that flight – it wouldn't have done to have gone to the hospital naked to pick him up. He saw the look on her face, and she saw the look on his – a look of intense longing.

Without saying a word, he tore off her stola, pulled down her trousers and buried his face between her legs.

"Alex, no!" she cried.

This was not *right* – not for her and certainly not for him. But he ignored her, and she couldn't bear to just thrust him away. So she steeled herself to save him from harm, remaining motionless as he bore down on her with lips and tongue. She couldn't fully *feel* what he was doing – not without gold. And yet, *knowing* what he was doing, and feeling for him...

Kalla's juices were flowing, and he was drinking them eagerly. Her invulnerable body might feel to him like a statue, but it was a *living* statue – and a loving one. She was actually *coming* – just from knowing how excited he was. Only there was something else, something deeper, something within her that needed to come out. She had never felt anything like it before, but there was a sense of great purpose – a purpose that *had* to be fulfilled. And then, even as she came again, she was suddenly overwhelmed by a feeling that the great purpose had somehow been accomplished.

What could it possibly mean? Was it a sign that the years were finally catching up with her, that her mind was playing tricks with her – as she knew happened to some ordinary humans in their last years?

She didn't confide her fears to Alex, but only chided him.

"That was *very* dangerous," she said.

"You didn't seem to mind."

"I was holding myself back, just the same. If I'd let myself respond in kind..."

"I couldn't help myself. I just wanted to show you I was still all right, even if my leg is paining me."

"Then show me in the usual way," Kalla said, taking off her shirt and putting on her necklace.

They fucked themselves silly. Everything seemed back to normal.

Only, that evening Alex said he wasn't feeling well. He couldn't hold any food down, and he was running a fever. Kalla took him back to the hospital, but the doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with him.

"You've been through the usual childhood ailments here, and been inoculated for all the common diseases here under Candida's public health program," one of them observed. "Could it be anything you picked up on Indra?"

"Not with such a long incubation period," Alex said, wearily but knowledgeably – he was up on the basics of medicine.

When his blood tests came back, they didn't show anything out of the ordinary. But his symptoms worsened, including loss of his facial and body hair, and he was becoming incoherent – he seemed to fear the end was near, and wanted last wishes known: to die at home. They couldn't do anything for him at the hospital; the medicines for fever weren't working. So they let him go home.

Kalla was crushed. All she could do was lay him down in bed, hoping that would make him more comfortable. He mumbled and moaned, nothing she could understand – except for the word "love." That crushed her all the more. She couldn't do anything for him, any more than the doctors, and hated herself for it.

She had resigned herself to the end. Only, the end never came. On the morning of the third day, he suddenly awakened, as if he'd only been asleep.

Kalla couldn't believe it at first.

Alex looked around, as surprised as she was.

"I guess I wasn't as sick as I thought I was," he said. "As they thought I was."

“As / thought you were. It’s like a miracle.”

“I don’t believe in miracles.”

“Neither do I, really.”

“Maybe they’ll figure it out when they look at me again. But they’d better be very careful, in case I’m infectious.”

“If anyone else had shown signs, I’d have heard about it.”

“I feel kind of... light.”

“No wonder!”

“I mean, *literally*.”

“Maybe it’s because your stomach is empty. You need to get some breakfast in you.”

Kalla headed for the kitchen and made some Indran pancakes with spicy green beans and vegetables and topped with cheese. It was a breakfast favorite Alex had learned from Kamana, his previous lover, long before he’d journeyed to her homeworld. He’d showed Kalla how to make it after taking up with her, and she knew it was just the thing to welcome him back to the world of the living.

Only, Alex did indeed seem light on his feet – even with the crutch, he stumbled as he came to sit down to eat.

And smashed the kitchen table.

There was a moment of utter silence. Then...

“How could you do that?” Kalla asked.

“I’m sorry,” he said, looking at the broken table and the mess on the floor where the pancakes had fallen.

“I mean, how *could* you do that?”

That was when it dawned on him, as it had already dawned on her.

It was then that he realized that his leg had healed, that he wouldn't have a limp, let alone need a cane.

* * *

They did a series of tests to confirm that the impossible had happened.

They were careful about it that morning, venturing outside to avoid risking further damage to the furniture.

There was a huge boulder on the grounds; Alex managed to lift it without effort and throw it a hundred feet away. Check.

Kalla took a kitchen knife and pressed it against his chest. It didn't leave a mark. She tried stabbing him with it, and it broke. Check.

It was the same with other tests, like knocking down a huge dead tree that they had wanted to get rid of anyway. An axe that Alexius had used to chop firewood couldn't harm him, even when she put all her strength behind it – it just flew to pieces.

There were limitations. Alex could leap into the air, clearing the villa and the trees around it, but he couldn't *fly*.

“It must be because you don't have a *volatai*,” she explained. “Whatever got into you from me could work with what was already there, but it couldn't create anything that wasn't already there.”

Not that it mattered, at least to her.

The man she loved had now become super powerful, *and* invulnerable. But there was one more test she was eager to make. She led him to a nearby meadow, stripped off

her clothes and bade him do likewise. It came as no surprise that he was up for that last test.

Kalla took his cock in her hand, and squeezed gently – then not so gently. It not only looked hard, it was hard – as hard as a Velorian's...

“Lie down!” she told him, and he lay down in the field.

She had taken him this way many times, but always under gold. Now she was as naked as he was as she welcomed him inside her, knowing that she wouldn't have to hold back.

There had been occasions in the past when she had secretly pleased herself, not just with her hands, but with steel bars – and the steel had been compressed and even melted. But now Alex was stronger than any steel; she could squeeze his cock with all her might, holding it prisoner within her, reveling in its invulnerability – until she finally relaxed her grip and let him come.

“It's like losing my virginity all over again,” he said afterwards, before taking top position for the next round. For the third round, he ate her out, and bit her invulnerable clit with his invulnerable teeth. And through the rest of that morning, he didn't neglect her invulnerable breasts or any other part of her body, nor did she overlook any of his.

“Now *you're* the one who'll have to wear gold, if any of the Guild women from the base come calling,” she kidded him.

“No, you're the only woman for me. And the only woman who *can* be. My cock is like a spitter now – my seed would be deadly.”

“Why hadn't I thought of that? But this is as new to me as it is to you. I've never heard of anything like it.”

“And we can’t let the world hear about it,” Alex warned. “The news sheets and the news nets would never let us alone – and God knows what the Scalantrans or the Indrans would make of it. Or Velor, for that matter...”

* * *

“It has to be something the Galen built into you,” Alex speculated the next day, getting into his Cosmognosis mind set. “Something they thought would be needed, some day, somewhere.”

“Surely not *now*. Surely not *here*. And nothing they wanted us to know about. But then, they never wanted us to know what would happen to us if we left Velor. They didn’t want us to know about other worlds at all, except theirs – and supposedly how we would become procreators for them there. The priests still believed in that when I was growing up. I don’t think anyone else took it seriously.”

“But what the Galen did with the people they took from Earth. That must be what you did to me. It’s all about the lifecyphers; somehow they can be altered or copied or reconfigured without losing their original functions. I don’t look any different, except for the missing hair.”

“Velorians men never have beards or body hair, and the hair on our heads grows only to a certain point. I guess it will be the same with you, but I don’t know why.”

“I feel the same inside; my brain is in working order... and all the rest.”

“Including your spitter.”

That was a joke, but Kalla decided to carry it a bit further. The next time she went to the Capital to meet with Nestor, she stopped by a store to buy a spitter – explaining that a friend of hers wanted it for hunting.

“Oh, *come on*,” he said when she told him what she had in mind, but he decided to humor her by assuming the position she ordered, stark naked, hands on his hips. She herself was already naked.

“Oh, come!” she shouted, and opened fire.

Alex couldn’t help himself. The pellets hitting his cock and balls teased him so much that he exploded in seconds – sending his cum splashing onto Kalla’s chest.

“Good aim!” she said, as if she hadn’t calculated the course his seed would take. She dipped her fingers in it and took a lick; her face lit up.

“You even *taste* Velorian now,” she pronounced.

But then there came a tweet from the farcaller she had set down nearby – even pursuing sexual fantasies, Kalla knew she had to stand ready for emergencies. When she answered, however, it wasn’t the kind of emergency she could deal with; it was worse – a sobering moment.

“Your father just died,” she told Alexius. “That was Nestor. It happened just after I left. Eusebia is too broken up to call the rest of the family, so he’s handling things. He wants us all to come to the Palace right away.”

“Oh God,” he cried.

As Kalla flew him to Feodoropolis, she feared not for his safety but for his morale. She knew the feeling of loss. But loss was part of the human experience, even for such as they.

It was thus that the cares of the great world intruded into the seemingly carefree world of their love. Ordinary life and death, and the consequences thereof, would come to haunt them in years to come...

Chapter 8. Relations – Strained and Strange

It was a solemn occasion, and an unsettling one – not just for the loss of Rulav, which was only to be expected at his age, but for Kalla's realization that she was losing her intimacy with the Patriarch Nestor's family.

It didn't help that she couldn't tell them how things had changed between her and Alex. It helped even less that *he* couldn't either – that he had to pretend he still had a gimpy leg and wasn't up to strenuous activity, let alone working as a test pilot.

It was strange to be at the Palace again; what family gatherings she'd attended since the Restoration had been at the Choniates Estate and, except for the matter of barring future Companions on Andros, had been devoted to family business, and she had attended them infrequently, as a matter of courtesy – although she was welcomed when it came to special occasions.

She had been there when Symeon's sons Constans and Damianos had married; they had children of their own; likewise Alexios and Petronia's son Rulav Komnenos – (who took his name from the Patriarch's father, a fair exchange for Alexius taking his from Alexios) and daughter Angelina; and the daughters of Isidoros and Justina, Galla and Martina Procopios. But whenever Nestor's son Libanius married, it would be at the Palace, a state occasion.

The older generation was passing; before long, it would all have passed. Rulav Tornikios had retired as Deacon of the Academy a decade ago. Candida was no longer Minister of Health. Flavia Choniates had kept up only a passing interest in marsh gas, and Justina had long since let newcomers trained in the farcical business take charge of that industry. Most of their children and grandchildren had scattered, returning to the

Palace or the Estate only for major state and/or social occasions – like so many other Androssians, they were used to keeping in touch by farcaller.

Libanius was 27 now, old enough to appreciate political realities – and how they might complicate his romantic life. But if Nestor was seeking a marriage alliance for his son, he hadn't confided in Kalla. She could hardly complain, considering that there were so many things she couldn't confide in him about – the transformation of Alex being only the latest. The future Patriarch's younger sister Procopia would probably have a better shot at true love – although it was doubtful that she loved her given name.

Kalla now felt closer emotionally to the children of Nikos Makropoulos than to the current generations of what had once been the Andros clan. Belisarius (now catapan of Strymon, but with *quaestors* to advise him), Nereida, Valens and Ariadne had shared in the tragedy of Nikos' murder. For reasons of state, Nestor had enjoined her never to tell why the catapan had been targeted – but she meant to tell them anyway someday, and hoped they would understand. Only, she couldn't think about that now...

She wore black today, as did all the members of the family, even the children. A priest led them in prayers, which even those who were in no sense at all Believers, gave their respect. There followed the mercy meal, at which they shared Koliva, a wheat dish freighted with religious significance – seen as symbolic of death and resurrection in the priest's blessing, taken from the Holy Book of the Church:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.

Kalla found herself unexpectedly touched by the Bible verse.

*In our own way, we are sowing grain and bringing forth much fruit, she thought. I have to keep that in mind, whatever else happens. I have to be true to **that**, even if there are other truths that I dare not share.*

This wasn't the place to discuss the fruits of lightning power, or the seeds sown by the farspeaking programs and the first aircraft. But she knew they were on the minds of the Patriarch and his family – including Alex, even though he was constrained to seem indifferent.

Nobody had mentioned Alexius' accident, or his reaction to it, during the service, or the mercy meal, or the reminiscences shared among family members afterwards – not just about Rulav's career, although there were anecdotes to tell; but about him as a *man*. Eusebia was moved to share tearful yet tender memories, beginning with when they met and fell in love.

"He was two years ahead of me at the Academy," she recalled. "But it turned out he'd taken first-year engineering under Father – and when I questioned him about two-way lightning power, he'd shared that with Rulav, who thought I'd been impertinent.

"Not in the least,' Father told him. 'Entirely pertinent. She's eager to understand lightning power – given that she wants to work in that field.'

"*A woman?*'

"She's my eldest daughter,' Father told him. 'She has her eyes on the future, and the ambition to help bring it about. On some worlds, I've been told, she'd be my heir.'

"But Father never let me know. It was Rulav. Jayar was still Patriarch then, and Kyros was... but Rulav knew what Father had meant, and that got him to thinking about where the world was going – and about *me*."

Only he hadn't had the nerve to approach her until they met by chance five years later during the Strymon dam project – after all, she was the Patriarch's daughter, and he was only a commoner... Eusebia's story told, things were beginning to wind down, and people were getting ready to leave.

But Kalla turned her head as she overheard a conversation Nestor was having with Alex across the room.



It was just small talk at first. But then...

“I’ve heard from Shazad,” he said. “He hopes you’ll reconsider resigning from the Ground Command. There’s still a lot of work you could do for the Guild there, even if you can’t fly again.”

“It’s just... nerves,” Alexius said, and he sounded nervous.

The Patriarch could never have guessed that what his brother was nervous about was the risk of giving himself away if he returned to work at the base – and got too caught up in the excitement to watch himself...

“That’s unfortunate,” Nestor said, with a sigh. But then, to lighten up a bit, added, “Still, you’re looking great!”

“The luck of the lifecyphers,” Alexius responded, off the cuff. It got a laugh, but his expression would come back to haunt him in later years.

* * *

“You just might go back to work, with enough practice,” Kalla chided him gently after they got home. “Maybe minimize the limp, as if your leg were still healing.”

“The doctors would wonder about that,” Alex pointed out. “And I can’t let them examine me. The very sight of my bare skin...”

“There’s that,” she conceded.

“And even if I could stay in character, out there, on a continuing basis rather than just occasionally, there might be another accident, or incident, that would expose me. It would be all over – for both of us. We could never have a private life again. Everyone would wonder how it happened. And some would wonder *why* – ‘Why just him?’”

“Maybe the Scalantrans can think of something.”

Only, when the *Bountiful Voyager* made its stop inbound for Velor later that year, none of her confidants could – neither Pakiula nor Vahirem nor Shangrin. Indeed, they found the news disturbing, for an entirely different reason than anyone on Andros might: What if the same thing were to happen elsewhere?

Kalla had to be frank about the intimate details, and the Scalantrans agreed that it wasn't likely they'd be replicated.

"We can't even ask about that at Velor, or they'd want to know why," Vahirem said. "Either it's never happened before, or it's a closely-guarded secret. Either way, if we tell them about Alexius, it could cause us no end of trouble."

* * *

For him, it had already caused no end of rapture...

"It's like Cleopatra's Grip," he had told her one night, early on, after she had just ridden him to a series of glorious orgasms.

"What?" Kalla asked.

"Cleopatra was a legendary queen on Earth," he explained. "She's said to have been famed for her muscular control – she could squeeze a man's cock at will, on and off, and milk it dry."

"We call it something else on Velor. But the men there love it too."

A few days later, she had teased him by showing what her Grip could do to an uruku steel kitchen knife – which came out crushed. She took it in hand and crushed it further, beyond recognition.

"But *nothing* can crush this," she said, taking his cock and squeezing it without mercy until he spurted on her breasts.

“Nothing can crush these, either,” he beamed, as he mauled them savagely until she had a nipple orgasm.

“Or this,” he added a little later, biting her clit with wild abandon, until she cried out so loudly that it would have wakened the whole neighborhood – if they had lived in a neighborhood.

It didn’t take them long to find other pleasures. What started as sort of a spur-of-the-moment joke morphed into a kind of foreplay. In time, it even became a game for them.

Kalla had learned from the Scalantrans that it had been played the other way on some worlds; it was a turn-on for holders of indentures to shoot at their Companions – targeting their breasts and crotches with their heaviest weapons. If they aimed right, they could make the Velorians come – and leave them dripping with desire for more. Then it was time for the men to deploy the weapons between their legs...

She’d never gone in much for that herself, though she had experienced orgasms from lightning strikes and when she’d shown off her invulnerability in battle to intimidate the forces of Festus and Pavel and Kyros. After the Restoration, and institution of the lottery, she’d sometimes shown off on Alkmene, as with the solar furnace, to inflame the winners. But she’d never felt the need to so indulge the men she loved, and she knew that such behavior was unheard of on Velor itself – men and women there were equal, at least within their classes, and class differences were small indeed compared to the gulf between Velorians and humans...

Yet Alex was a seeming miracle. Kalla knew there were protos on distant First Generation worlds, as the Scalantrans called them, but she’d never met one and surely

never would. Only right here at home, she had an invulnerable man with an invulnerable cock – and could have him any time she wanted. She could throw caution to the winds, let loose with him as she had never let loose with any man since leaving Velor. And that included using the spitter as a sex toy.

She'd aim at his chest first and work her way down. He'd already be steel-hard by the time she reached his crotch, and then the game was how long he could hold out against the delicious assault of the spitter's pellets, knocking his cock this way and that. It never took long for him to shoot his load... only his first load of the day, of course. But they indulged in that sort of thing outdoors – lest the ricochets damage their home.

Turnabout being fair play, would invite him to shower her with pellets, which left smudges of lead on her breasts and abs where they bounced off, just as they had on his crotch. Enough found her nipples to bring her off, but she remarked afterwards that his mouth could do a much better job – there and down below... Alex took the hint, and drove her wild that way.

Shooting him was more exciting for Kalla than being shot. She was *accustomed* to being invulnerable, after all, but he wasn't – and she hadn't had an invulnerable lover for a century and a half. It didn't hurt that, but for his dark hair, he looked like a Velorian – and a gorgeous one at that. His now-hairless body fairly glowed in her eyes. Yet he was never vain about it, only grateful to her for having made him what he now was – and letting him take every advantage of that.

The day after meeting with the Scalantrans, Kalla sprung another tease on him – as a special gift for her, they had managed to fabricate a uruku steel/crystal composite mesh version of a kind of tiny men's loin cover that was popular on Indra. She got him to

put it on – very gingerly – to see if his rising cock would tear through it before her spitter. His cock won, and he proceeded to put it to good use.

Yet being so wrapped up with each other, however fulfilling, was also distracting. There were matters that concerned Kalla and Nestor in the short and the long run, and another matter that concerned just her and Alexius in the long run. And while there were constant reminders of the former, it was easy for them to put the latter out of mind...

Chapter 9. New Alliance, New Diversions

It would have been shocking, only a generation earlier, for Libanius to have wed Verina. A woman of *business*, rather than a representative of one of the landed families and/or a political faction that needed to be accommodated?

Yet it had happened, with the blessing of Nestor and the Family Council.

“It won’t turn the Palace into a business venture,” the Patriarch argued. “Verina has already renounced any claim to inheritance of the Danelis empire, and also agreed that, when it comes time for Libanius to succeed me, she will retire from the Transport Group and sever all ties with family businesses.”

He paused for a moment.

“Naturally, she wishes a long life for me!”

That occasioned a lot of laughs, Verina later told Kalla, who hadn’t attended the meeting, although she might have – she just didn’t want to make it appear that she had any interest in the marriage contract of a future Patriarch.

“I’ll have plenty of time to build a lightning power transportation empire,” she said. “He wants me to make my dreams come true, as well as his own. And as the Patriarch’s

consort, I'll work with him *and* the Indrans. Perhaps we'll even travel in space together. It's the best of all possible worlds."

"He knows you've already traveled in space..."

Verina blushed, but was all smiles.

"He knows we tried each other out. But I've tried *him* out. Tried him out a *lot*. So I know what I'm getting. And the pillow talk is great; you can't beat a man who's good at fucking *and* intelligent conversation."

A generation ago, no high-born woman would have admitted, let alone boasted, of having "tried out" a man before marriage.

"I can tell how much his parents love each other, even after so many years. That means he should be a good father himself. Another plus."

"So how did you two meet?"

"Fastwheelers were on the Farspeaker news, and it was easy enough for him to find out where we were making them, so he stopped by to take a look, and then he wanted to go for a ride. Like when I took you and Alexius home."

"How did it go?"

"It was a rough ride. I told him he should get his father to do something about the roads."

"He didn't seem interested when I brought that up," Alexius broke in.

"And now the Transport Ministry is actually doing something."

"So I've noticed."

"It wasn't long before we were doing our part by getting into cushioned wheels," Verina continued. "But by then, I was taking Lib for another kind of ride..."

* * *

“To reach the future, we must transcend the past,” Nestor told the world over the Farspeaker system, in announcing his son’s upcoming wedding. And the wedding itself broke with tradition, being held on the grounds of the Farspeaking Tower rather than at the Palace.

A platform had been mounted halfway up the tower, so that everyone in the huge crowd below to see Libanius and Verina exchange their vows, and people in the crowd could hear them on their farcallers. It was a long climb for the bride and groom, but they were young and vigorous. Likewise the priest, who was also a magistrate, and managed to wed civil and religious ceremony as he wed the couple.

“I hereby proclaim them truly wed, before God and this company,” he declared, after they had exchanged rings and vows. The newlyweds themselves were exchanging kisses – not just ceremonial pecks, but passionate embraces. Thousands of onlookers responded with cheers, and the couple broke off their kissing to turn and wave to them.

A caravan of fastwheelers awaited outside the grounds for the newlyweds and their families, and was soon heading south to the old capital of Ethrata, where they would spend their honeymoon – it was a gesture calculated to honor the past *and* the present. It helped that the southern road had been smoothed and paved – no problems of a rough ride, even if they hadn’t had cushioned wheels.

At every town and village along the way, people lined the roadside to cheer the future Patriarch and his bride. The communities themselves looked prosperous, as did the farms between them – it was planting time, and steam-powered machines could be

seen sowing some of the fields. In orchards, the trees were in bloom with the promise of fruits and nuts to come...

Kalla and Alexius rode with the caravan; this was one family occasion they just *couldn't* miss. Verina made a point of seeing them off for home afterwards.

"You don't look a day older, Alex," she said. "Having a Velorian for a lover must work wonders."

"Just the luck of the lifecyphers," Alexius said with a straight face. "As for Kal, if it were just living with her, she'd have repaired the damage."

He made a show, as he had at the beginning of the caravan trip, of having a bit of trouble getting into the fastwheeler.

* * *

At home, Kalla and Alex could abandon caution, play out their wildest fantasies with complete abandon.

The next time her farcaller summoned her to a fire, she had to enter the flames to rescue the people trapped inside. She had to strip quickly before responding, lest she become a superhuman torch – and therefore endanger the very lives she was there to save.

Mission accomplished, and medical people taking care of the only minor burns suffered by the grateful living, she flew home. She was still sooty when she arrived, and Alex asked her how the fire had felt.

"I don't have time to think of that when I'm on the job," she said. "I had to get the people out as fast as I could. I couldn't just stand around in the blaze."

“But you *could* here. And we’ve got that fallen tree from the last storm... it’s really dry by now.”

Kalla smiled her assent, and Alex began to strip, but she had another idea.

“Keep your clothes on,” she said. “They’re replaceable.”

He got the hint.

It took them a while, using just their arms, to knock the tree to pieces, after which they arranged the pieces into a pyre – only with a place for Kalla to seat herself. Alex fetched a container of a saraba-based cleaning fluid, and poured it on the wood beneath her. Then he lit a match and tossed it at her feet.

The fire started with a flash, then became a growing blaze as the wood caught. Kalla was already wet with anticipation, and her love juices sizzled as the flames engulfed her, and the updraft of hot air sent her hair blowing wildly. As the fire intensified, it felt pleasantly warm against her breasts, which she began playing with to pleasure herself – and tease Alex.

She beckoned to him, and he stepped into the inferno, still wearing his tunic and trousers – which instantly burst into flames. In just moments, burning pieces of fabric fell away from him, exposing his invulnerable body in all its glory. The fire licked against his hard cock, and she could tell how much he loved it – there was a burst of steam as he spurted. Her cunt was steaming too, longing for him to bury himself in it...

Moments later they were fucking like crazy, the violence of it causing the pyre to collapse around them, burying them in blazing wood hot enough to melt lead, tin, brass, bronze – even gold, had they been wearing any. Their bodies were red hot, and all the hotter for each other – converting the heat to orgone, something familiar to Kalla but new

to Alex. Cock and cunt alike were tireless, and only when the fire had burned itself to embers did they begin to return to normal...

There wasn't any chance to bathe in fire again without cutting down perfectly good trees – if they ordered lumber, people might wonder why. It was back to spitter play for a time. But they found other diversions, like fucking in space – nowhere near Alkmene or any warships being test-flown by the Guild. Basking in the heat of the sun at close range was just as pleasurable as bathing in fire at home, if not as spectacular.

But as the novelty of Alexius' invulnerability wore off, they were content to pleasure themselves abed. There was the warm inner glow they felt when passion was spent. And there was the intimacy of minds as well as bodies; they could converse about anything and everything... including Cosmognosis. Yet, as the years wore on, they realized that having each other increasingly meant having *only* each other.

Chapter 10. Necessary Sacrifice

"How can this be?" Nestor asked.

"I don't know how it can be. Nobody knows, even on Velor."

"And how could you have dared to keep it from me?"

"How could I do otherwise? I knew from the outset that if anyone else here found out, we'd never hear the end of it. I'd be seen as a goddess who could confer godhood at her whim, and Alexius as the beneficiary of that whim. People would never believe that it wasn't intentional – or that what happened might have been completely fortuitous, never to be repeated for anyone else."

“If they learn now, they might think I had known and approved, that I was favoring my own brother.”

“They might wonder that you had not favored yourself.”

“Or Juliana, or Libanius, or their children. The list goes on. It’s one thing for you reward the lottery winners; they have never expected more than a passing dalliance, but this... it could create demands for another kind of lottery, in the interests of fairness. Yet as you say, you can’t promise to do for anyone else what you have done for Alexius.”

“It’s a dilemma, Sebastos. I can’t see any way out of it.”

By invoking his honorific, she made it clear that she knew it was a matter of state, not just an issue of family. But Nestor knew it was both.



“If this had happened with anyone else, outside the family, with one of the lottery winners, it wouldn’t necessarily concern the Palace – people might understand, even if they were jealous of you and your chosen companion. But if they come to believe that you deliberately chose Alexius to – enhance, shall we call it? – they could see that as a sign...”

He was clearly leading up to something. He looked at her gravely. It was not only his years – he was now 57 – that told the tale.

“I have to think of the future,” he said. “My own future, and that of Libanius, and that of the world he will have to guide when I am gone, and that his son after him. There is only one way out.”

She looked back at him just as gravely.

No, the years had not been as kind to the Patriarch as to Alexius, even before she had done... what she had done. Now it was 12 years later. She and her lover had lived an increasingly reclusive life, rarely appearing together at family gatherings and never at state occasions.

* * *

It had become too obvious that Alex wasn’t aging...

One of her excuses for keeping him out of sight had been that she was afraid he might meet the same fate as Nikos. But Nestor, who knew why her previous lover had been murdered, wasn’t buying that – Ennodios, the catapan of the Northern Reach, had died, and there was never any evidence that he had been involved. His successor, Elias Nepos, had been hand-picked by the Patriarch.

Their only frequent visitors in those years were Libanius and Verina, who shared a bond with Kalla that they couldn't allude to at family meetings. They always brought their children; they had named their eldest son Feodor.

"It's as much to honor you as to honor your first Patriarch," Libanius said at that time. It startled Kalla to have Feodor referred to as "her" Patriarch, but she was glad to see him honored – one day he would become Feodor II. Would she finally be showing her own age by then, or even have died?

Alex wouldn't, assuming his enhanced life span would be the same as hers.

Verina had remarked on his youthful looks, even though Libanius hadn't. Other members of the family gathered for funerals – Candida was gone now; likewise Eusebia, Flavia, Justina and Petronia, and their spouses – also took notice. It was Kalla who usually invoked lifecyphers, while Verina, with mock earnestness, would credit his love life with keeping him young.

In later years, Kalla had concocted a lotion that would adhere to Alex's hair – which couldn't be dyed, of course – and dried there to make it appear he was graying. It wouldn't last long, but combined with the gimpy leg act, it was enough to convince the patriarchal family and the Makropoulos heirs on their occasional visits to the Capital and Nesalonika. But eventually, it was *not* enough.

They would have to keep to themselves entirely, never inviting family and friends to their estate, or appearing together elsewhere. Kalla hated herself for that – especially when Belisarius farcalled her to ask what he and his kin could have possibly done to be shunned by her. After 20 years, she had to face the inevitable. It was to the Palace that she had to come, and to the Patriarch that she had to tell all...

* * *

“Since you have made things plain, I must make myself equally plain,” Nestor said.
“Alexius cannot remain here. And nobody else must ever know why.”

He touched on Kalla’s iconic status – there were those who fairly worshipped her, although she always disclaimed them and refused to meet with or have any dealings with them. Yet among the ordinary people of Andros, she was highly regarded for her historical ties to the Patriarchs, her support of technological progress in concert with the Indrans, and her rescue work. Even her services to the lottery winners were seen in a positive light

“But what if your enhancement of Alexius is taken by some as a *sign*?” he went on.
“What if they believe that he has somehow been *chosen* to be the next Patriarch, in place of Libanius?”

Skietra! she thought.

“It doesn’t *quite* matter, yet,” he said. “But what of years from now, when he *still* doesn’t look his age? That would seem to be the prognosis. It could happen even sooner, if he survives some accident that should have killed him. And he is my *brother*. That complicates things.”

Indeed. It could split the family, split Andros itself. Alexius might be condemned as a menace if it was thought he might try to supplant Libanius, even as he was being hailed as a savior by cultists – and perhaps being seen by some ordinary Androssians as a potential stabilizing influence who could reign for generations to come.”

“Libanius and his family could be in danger,” Nestor warned. “And it isn’t enough just to send Alexius away – if people learn the truth, there would be those awaiting a

Second Coming, even resorting to violence to bring it about. He must die in the eyes of the world; you must give him up – now and forever.”

It was *devastating*, even worse than when Nikos was murdered. She hadn’t had any part in that, but she would *have* to have a part in this. She would have to work out a plan with Nestor, and break it to Alexius – and then help carry it out.

It was a simple plan they came up with, a plan that didn’t involve the rest of the family, let alone outside parties here – or the Indrans. No need for Alexius to belatedly and inexplicably rejoin the Space Force, only to have a fatal accident. Business aircraft had come into use over the past few years, and nobody would think twice about renting one to a member of the family – ostensibly for a hunting trip to the Northern Reach.

There would be a crash, and she would hear about it, and fly to the remote scene – only to find him not only dead but so badly mangled that she couldn’t bear to look at him or suffer anyone else to do so. She would fly home, see to buying a coffin, and then there would be a closed casket funeral and a decent burial and that would be *it*. As for Nestor, his part would be to supply false identity papers to Alexius as a wealthy business magnate eager to see other worlds – there were indeed a few such types these days.

The Patriarch looked at her gravely. “You must accept this, and live with it. Time is the healer of all necessary evils.”

There was a story behind that, but she tried to put it out of her mind.

* * *

When she broke to news to Alex, weeks later and just a few days before the arrival of the *Bountiful Voyager* on its inbound journey, he reacted with disbelief at first, then shock and anger.

“You couldn’t tell *me* about this?” he cried. “You’ve trusted me with everything you know about the Aureans – things you won’t tell even the Patriarch – and now you hold out on me about ending of our *life* together?”

“I wanted to spare you for as long as I could,” Kalla pleaded. “To share our time together as long as possible. I *hate* this, hate it as much as you do. But Nestor is right; it has to be done. You can see the logic of it.”

“Logic be damned!” he yelled; yet he could see the logic, even if he couldn’t feel it.

He began to cry, desperately, and they made love desperately, knowing it must be for the last time. But in the morning, he balked.

“I’m not going,” he declared. “You can’t *make* me go!”

“But if you don’t, others may die – would you want to see Libanius and Verina and their children slaughtered by maniacs acting in your name?”

“We could protect them, and denounced and punish such maniacs.”

“Just knowing that you’re enhanced would have other consequences, global in scope – consequences we can’t predict, let alone prepare against. And the Scalantrans are afraid of what will happen if other worlds get word, if Velor gets word.”

“So now you’re getting into Cosmognosis, are you?”

They hadn’t talked about *that* in quite some time, and never with the enthusiasm they had once shared – before his enhancement.

“It’s a matter of practical politics and ensuring progress for Andros, something I experience in long before you were born.” It was a cruel thing to say, and she instantly regretted it. “I’m sorry,” she added.

“If you were *really* sorry, you’d at least offer to come with me.”

“You know I can’t, any more than I could when you traveled to Indra. You made that journey out of love for Andros. I know that and Nestor knows it; we won’t let people here forget it. Ever. But now you have to show that love again, however it hurts.”

Alex said nothing for a moment, then: “So be it.”

And it came to pass...

Part Three: The Call of Duty

Chapter 1. Things Fall Apart...

Kalla hadn’t been able to respond to the message from the *Bountiful Voyager*. It had to be important; it came from Pendril, the ship historian – Pakiula must have retired, she surmised. But it could wait for a while. The ship wasn’t even due to set down for the trade fair until the next day, and it was still far enough off for a time delay in farcalling.

Right now, she was caught up dealing with a chain reaction accident on the Great Northern Road some 20 stadia from the capital. A fastwheeler freight carrier, loaded with shinefur from the Northern Reach, had hit a passenger fastwheeler that had slowed on account of heavy traffic, and sent it crashing into the next vehicle and so on down the line.

Kalla was used to dealing with emergencies...

She had braved flames to rescue people from burning buildings – whatever she was wearing at the time was consumed, but the rescuees didn’t mind. If they happened to be men, or even lesbian women, they only wished they could have encountered her under other circumstances.

In a Strymon River flood she'd been summoned to a few years ago, she'd had to fly back and forth picking people out of the raging water and carrying them to safety – she was too late for some, and that hurt. In one case, a whole family was clinging to the roof of a house that had been caught up in the torrent, and she had dragged it to shore – that made up for the hurt, but not entirely. A life lost was a life lost.

It was only farcalling that enabled her to respond to such emergencies in time to do any good. That was rarely the case with violent crimes; by the time she could get to the scene, they were usually over. In earlier years, she had dealt with hostage situations at bank robberies; but robbers soon learned to get in and out quickly – even if it meant shooting people rather than merely threatening them. That was a downer. Yet she could still save victims of family disputes – the perpetrators, usually men, nearly always turned their spitters from their intended victims to *her* and let off a few shots before she could grab the weapons and crush them. No harm done, except bullet holes in her clothes...

But traffic accidents were the worst, because they couldn't be blamed on nature or, rarely, on criminality. They came of ordinary human carelessness, often aggravated by stupidity. It had begun with the steamcar races, succeeded in recent times by fastwheeler races. But the Synod had imposed strict liability on the sponsors, who were required to have doctors and medical equipment at the arena – they could respond to accidents in moments, and that left Kalla off the hook.

Only, it was different with accidents on roads and highways. They could happen any time, anywhere. Kalla had to be ready, and that meant keeping a satchel close at hand with splints, spinal immobilization devices, bandages, dressings, oxygen delivery

units and airways clearing tubes. At least she didn't also need sledgehammers, saws, hydraulic spreading devices and other equipment for breaking into vehicles...

But this latest was an absolute nightmare. There was no way she could free all the victims in time to save their lives, or even treat those she could free. She had to force herself to choose, starting with those in vehicles that had caught fire – ripping the doors off, using her super breath just enough to push the flames away from the victims, lifting them out as gently as she could, laying them down just as gently on the pavement a safe distance away, and then moving on to the next. By the time she could begin emergency treatment, some of them were past treatment...

There had been screams and moans of pain, and even cries for help – those who manage that were probably least in need. There were even some who had managed to free themselves, and might be if help themselves, if they weren't so disoriented. One of these was the driver of the freight hauler, which had suffered little damage because of the size of its greatox – not an actual greatox, of course, but serving the same function even if the driver rode inside it and manned the controls there. But all he seemed to care about was the fate of his cargo – she didn't know yet what it was.

And then her farcaller sounded. She listened to the beginning of the message, then cut it off. There was still work to do *here*. There was the pall of smoke from the burning vehicles – and the stench of burned flesh from some of the victims. She was covered with soot herself, and her clothes were history – that went with the job, but it wasn't any comfort to her.

Yet it might have been even worse, she realized. This close to the capital, the Sotiria division of the police responded within 10 minutes of her arrival and began taking

over the treatment – Kalla saved them time by breaking into the fastwheelers she hadn't seen to already, and helped get the drivers and passengers out. It was still a chaotic situation; the fastwheelers that had been burning were still burning, and the firefighters who arrived about the same time as the rescue workers had to contend with that.

The Sotiria – their name meant Salvation as well as rescue, and had religious overtones – appreciated her efforts. One of them even gave her a salute when he had a moment to spare, but though she was virtually naked he didn't take the time to stare. The job came first for him, too. By chance, the freight carrier driver approached her to demand that she clear the highway so that he could get through. She told him to go fuck himself, and he threatened to report her.

"Lots of luck!" she snapped, and went back to work.

Kalla finally took to the air for home when she had done all she could do, and felt free to leave the rest to the authorities. But her mind wasn't at rest; she had worked for progress, believed in progress, but it could have a bitter price. Perhaps it was a matter of too much, too soon – and yet it was part and parcel of the program to prepare Andros for a challenge even Nestor didn't know about yet. Only, her relations with the Patriarch had been formal and correct but no longer intimate since... Alex.

Because of that, she had avoided Family Council sessions, and she had seen little of the family elsewhere over the past eight years. Although she kept up with them in the farspeaking news – now the farviewing news, for any equipped with receivers for images – she had a hard time remembering the names of the youngest generation. Her official contacts had been mostly with the Indrans, here on Andros and in space.

She had done better with the Makropoulos family. Belisarius was getting along in years, and his own children Andronikos and Joannina were grown and married and had children of their own. Kalla visited him often in Nesalonika, whereas catapan he had made education his top priority, founding a technical institute named for his father – and thus finding a use for the summer palace Jayar had built there.

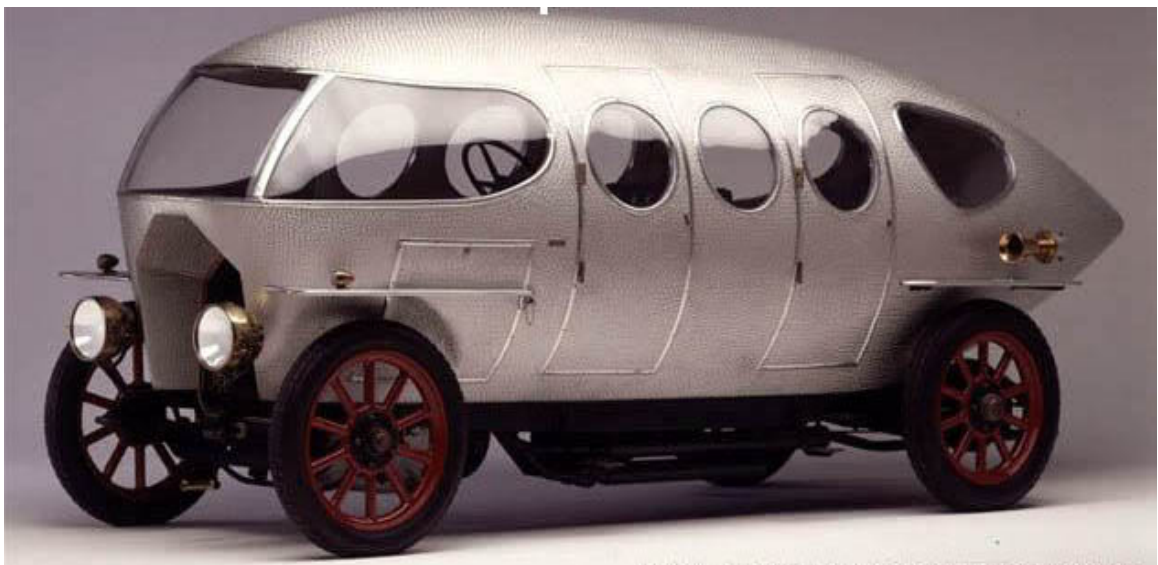
Nestor himself had signed off on that, since the vacant palace had been built for the Patriarch; but otherwise, he had nothing to do with it. Kalla was a frequent guest lecturer, because everyone knew who she was – and that could increase interest and enrollment. It was the engineers on the faculty, however, who did the real teaching – and it was nothing like that at the Academy in Feodoropolis. Strymon needed men and women who could service wind vane generators, operate road building equipment and the like to keep the economy going – and growing.

Valens, Nikos' younger son, who had gone into banking, invested shrewdly in new but promising enterprises like processed foods and the stores that sold them. He too was based on Nesalonika, because the second city seemed to be home to more progressive businessmen than the Capital. He and Aetheria had four children, Methodios, Iosephos, Byzantia and Cyra. Nikos' younger daughter Ariadne and her husband Demetrios Gabalas, a physician who lived in a rural town called Mokissos, had stopped at two: Nikos and Yolanda.

At a family gathering a few years ago, Kalla had encouraged Belisarius to see to the publication of the essay Nikos had just been begun to work on before he died, about the rights of women – and the catapan had urged his older sister Nereida Sarantenos to complete it. She and her husband Arethas ran their own transport company, having long

since left government service; their children, born late, were both daughters – Athena and Erinna – and that meant...

Nikos would have appreciated Kalla's closest friend in the Feodoropolis: Verina, who still worked for the Transport Group of her family's business empire even though she was married to the future Patriarch. She was still bringing out new fastwheelers, some of them lightning powered and the very latest equipped with wheel cushions – she had lobbied hard for the import and cultivation of plants that produced the raw material for them, just as she had previously lobbied for better roads.



Kalla needed to talk to her now, she realized. To unburden herself.

Verina had a modest second home/office in Feodoropolis, from which she took care of business – it would have been unseemly to have so at the Palace. She had only a small staff; most of the people who worked for her worked at the factory, which Kalla and Alex had toured soon after they met.

The roads had been improved a great deal since Verina had given them a rough ride home after that tour, but widening and paving them had inevitably increased traffic. With the increased prosperity, ordinary country people as well as the landed gentry and the urban business class could take to the road – to see to business or just see the country.

“It’s the lack of education and enforcement,” Verina told her when Kalla called on her to unburden herself about the disaster on the Great Northern Road. “Aunt Valeria told me that some of the first settlers to harness greatoxen were killed when they got out of hand; they had to learn how to handle them. Some of the first shinefur hunters got killed by brightbears; they had to learn how to deal with brightbears. And now they’re actually raising them.”

“There are schools that teach driving.”

“But people don’t have to go there – some just learn from friends and family. And there still isn’t any overall system of traffic laws, let alone penalties for breaking them – we just follow traditional rules of the road that go back to settlement, and some of those we could do without. Like commoners having to yield to aristocrats.”

“Valeria is an aristocrat. You’re an aristocrat.”

“But we don’t make anything of it. We have our own ways.”

Verina certainly did, as Kalla had discovered when she had won the lottery for a visit to Alkmene – and later, when she had shared the details of her romance with Lib, as she called him.

They had two daughters by now, and a second son named Menander – his name would come to be a sore point for Kalla, but that was still in the future, when it was part

of the true story Nestor and Alexius. A story as taboo as the Aurean menace, of which even Nestor still knew nothing.

Even when she talked about personal heartbreaks, Kalla had to fudge the truth.

"I've loved three men since my indenture ended," she had reminded Verina a few years after Alexius' official death. "The first died of old age, the second was murdered and the third was killed in an accident. I haven't exactly been lucky in love. And now it's as if I don't have a life at all."

Gabras, Nikos and Alex. And yet, she wasn't being truly candid with Verina. She had known Gabras only very late in his life, and had given him poison to spare him an agonizing death. And Alex was still alive... somewhere. It hurt her to dissemble so – keeping state secrets was one thing, but being unable to confide in those closest to her...

Yet it was true that she no longer had a life – not an intimate life, at any rate. She might never find a true love again – indeed, that might be for the best; it was as if there were a curse on her... as if anyone she truly loved was doomed. And she still felt the shame of how she had treated Alex – how and where could *he* ever find love again?

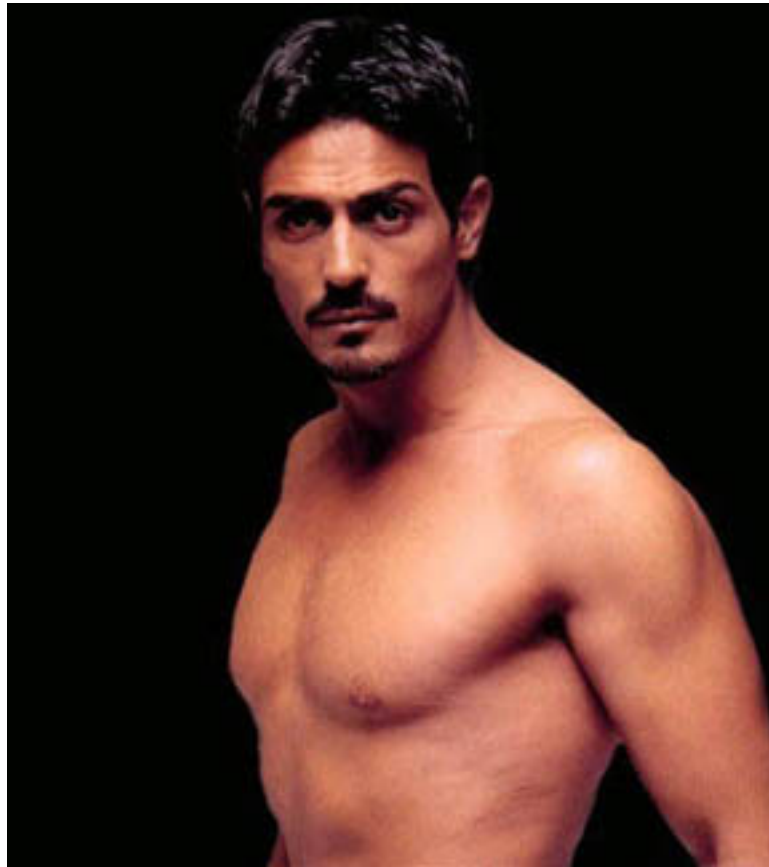
So many changes in her relationships. She remembered her life before coming to Andros; casual sex had been the rule on Velor and aboard the *Bountiful Voyager*. She hadn't known of monogamy before her indenture, nor about the exceptions to it granted Companions on other worlds. She had accepted the laws and customs of Andros during her term, and the customs of Terrans generally afterwards. But she was still a Velorian, and perhaps it was best to return to Velorian customs.

So she saw to her body's needs, not only with lottery winners from Andros but with the Indrans. Not those everyone on Andros knew, but those at the remote second base

on Alkmene, who were building and flight-testing warships of the same design that their Guild of Air and Space Transport Engineers had developed on Indra.

Nearly all the Guild members assigned to the new base were men; the handful of women there saw only to clerical duties. Back on Indra, they'd had their pick of women – and the most enterprising among them had been favored by Amiela. Here they could be favored by Kalla, who was eager to please.

She later treated them to the awesome sight of bathing in the heat of their solar furnace. She could use the orgone, but the intense heat didn't just get her hot – it got her hot and *bothered*, and from her tachyon vision she could tell the Indran men were hot and bothered. Once she had converted the heat to orgone and cooled off to a safe body temperature, she was ready to take them on.



First in line, Arjun Aggarwal turned out to be handsome and well-built, quite apart from being up for the occasion.

Not only that, but he knew how to pleasure a woman in every way, thanks to the Kama Sutra. He worshipped her with his hands and lips as well as his cock, and made sure she came before he did – that took incredible self-control, given that he'd admitted it was his first time with a Velorian. And he had stamina, too, never going soft after he came. When they came together, she could put the pain of losing Alex out of her mind for the moment and simply enjoy fucking as an end in itself.

By the time the last of the Indrans had finished with her – or she had finished with them – she had lost count of the number of times she had come. It had all been mindless. She was filled with cum, splattered with cum. But now it was time to come down, and get down to business that had brought her here.

She had to quickly take a shower and get dressed to make herself presentable, and shift mental gears for serious discussion of serious matters – such as whether the Scalantrans might supply Indra with Vendorian steel. Uruku steel should be enough for the warships, as long as the Aureans didn't have it. But what if they *did* get hold of it?

She thought of Alex again, and his theory of Cosmognosis. She'd brought that up with the Indrans – who didn't seem to think much of it, although they'd expressed their condolences over his death; they knew he and Kalla had been close, although not just how close. After a time, she'd taken up playing chaturanga again. She was getting better at it,

*Maybe I'll get better at other things, the things that really **matter**,* she thought.

And in due course, there came the chance she'd been waiting for, although it came with alarming news...

Chapter 2. The Truth Will Out

If Kalla no longer had a full life, she nevertheless still had a Purpose. She had been pursuing that Purpose on Alkmene as well as Andros. But it was only after meeting with Pendril on the outbound *Bountiful Voyager*, which had taken orbit but not yet landed, that she could finally share it with Nestor.

"The Empire is on the move," the historian told her, all alone with her in the white room – the same room where Pakiula had met her and Alexius on previous occasions, and where the deception of Nestor had begun.

There had been an Aurean attack on Occator, a seeded world on a different vector from Velor than Andros – not just a raid, nor a mere attempt at infiltration, but a massive all-out invasion.

"It was practically a miracle that the *Promise of Wealth* found out in time to bring word," she said. "They were just approaching the wormhole for the next leg of their circuit when they picked up the transmissions. The Aureans had bombed the capital of the planet itself, destroying command and control of its forces – imperial troops, far more heavily armed than any that Occator, an agricultural world named for a Roman god of harrowing, could muster, were just landing, the last the Scalantrans heard."

It had taken five years for the *Promise of Wealth* to reach Velor, even skipping the other stops on its return leg – boosting as fast as it could from wormhole to wormhole. The Velorian Senate, which hadn't expected things to go this far, had been blindsided by

the latest attack. It had ignored the annexation of Agean decades earlier; the High Council hadn't determined whether that takeover had been peaceful – even encouraged by the Companion there.

“Perhaps we should have pressed harder then,” Pendril said. “That’s what Amiela thought. But it takes time for us to reach a consensus, and in any case, we didn’t want to make a move without the support of Velor. It has taken Occator to bring that.”

“Can we expect any help from that quarter?”

“The Senate has authorized creation of a naval force to defend the Velorian system wormhole, but it’s doubtful that force will be deployed elsewhere, however much we might wish it. Still, it has ordered a General Alert, to be conveyed to all worlds trading with us by every outbound ship. But it will take years for that alert to reach everywhere. And we don’t know where the Enemy might strike before that.”

“Was there any reason they chose Occator?”

“It’s strategically located, just like Andros – only it’s a nexus for several different circuits. Ships trading on other circuits won’t know the danger until it’s too late. We have an edge, compared to them. But we have to come clean now. Nestor must speak to your world as he has never spoken before – by farviewer as well as farspeaker. He must be seen as well as heard. And he must be believed. You can see to that.”

“Perhaps at the trade fair...”

“There won’t be a trade fair. We can’t waste any more time. It’s already been seven years since the attack on Occator. We have no idea what the Aureans are up to now, or what they’re planning next. We are leaving immediately, to bring word to Indra, to consult

with the Guild and Amiela. That's our immediate and only priority, now that we've brought word to Andros."

"The Patriarch and the people will wonder why..." Kalla said.

"We'll leave it up to you to tell them," Pendril said.

Kalla had just enough time to confirm that Pakiula had indeed retired. There were a new travel captain and a new trade captain, Mahind and Aimata, but Pendril wouldn't even take the time to introduce them. The *Bountiful Voyager* was waiting only for her to leave make its departure.

It might be a melodramatic gesture, but there was nothing Kalla could about it. Nothing but tell all to the Patriarch. Perhaps she should have done so years ago, when the rumors of war were only rumors. Had she failed her duty to the Patriarch, to Andros itself?

Another thought suddenly crossed her mind, another failed duty: *I should make a clean breast of things with Belisarius and his family, about the death of Nikos. And let them make of it what they will...*

No more secrets and lies after that, whenever she could manage it, except about Alexius. But perhaps one day, she could even unburden herself about him...

* * *

Nestor looked solemn now that she had brought him the news, all but apologizing for having kept him in the dark for so long. When she had finally finished, he appeared to take it philosophically, although he might have been tempted to take it personally – and angrily.

What had convinced him was the abrupt departure of the *Bountiful Voyager*. Had Pendril somehow foreseen that? Surely a few days' delay for the trade fair wouldn't have made any difference to the Indrans – but their action came as a shock to Androssians, dominating the farspeaking and farviewing news. There was a panic over what it would mean to the economy. What was happening and why?

Now Nestor would have to tell them – and bring home to his people the greatest crisis their world had ever faced.

“Your deception was a necessary evil,” he remarked curtly. “But I can see plainly that it was truly necessary, not just payment in kind.”

This was as close as he could come to mentioning the matter of Alexius. They had never referred to him by name since the day she had given in to necessity. And she knew that, however she had hated his decision, it had been as hard for him as it had been for her.

Only she was the one who had lost the love of her life, the one man who might have shared the life of a Velorian with her. She had never gotten over that. She feared she never would.

“Time is the healer of all necessary evils,” Nestor had told her at the time. “An ancient Hellene named Menander said that, more than 1,500 years ago.”

“Was this a necessary evil, then?”

“It was an evil thing to do to you, and to him. And it was necessary thing to do to you, and to him. For the sake of Andros.”

For the sake of Andros...

She had looked up Menander. It turned out that he had been a playwright, and that his plays were said to have all been comedies. None had survived – at least, not here on Andros. Maybe Olympia...

Had Nestor known about this when he embraced the Hellene's aphorism? Libanius had named his youngest son Menander, Kalla knew – had the Patriarch held him up to his heir as a fount of wisdom?

She had decided then never to ask him about it. It would be pointless, even cruel. And she decided now never bring it up with Libanius, either – it wouldn't be too many years before he succeeded his father and had to face the burden that Nestor bore now. There was work to be done; they all had to work together openly in a world that would soon learn it was in danger...

Nestor picked up his farcaller and summoned Libanius to the palace.

"There's a matter we need to discuss," he said. "But I can't talk about it on the caller."

"Is it about the Scalantrans skipping out on the trade fair? Verina was really upset about that, and the newspeakers—"

"Nothing to do with that. Just come quickly."

When Libanius arrived at Nestor's patriarchal office, he was surprised to find Kalla there, knowing that she and her father had been estranged for some years, for reasons neither had ever explained.

"Is this about her, then?" he wondered.

Kalla shook her head, and deferred to the Patriarch.

"Only in a sense," Nestor said. "You're about to take ship to Alkmene, with Kalla."

“What?”

“You’re about to become the first Minister of Defense, and I’m about to tell you why. But you need to see what that involves at first hand. You’ll have to be prepared for war, a war such as Andros has never experienced, against an enemy of which you know nothing – of which I knew nothing until Kalla brought word today.”

“But... Father?”

“By the time it comes, you may stand in my place. You will then have to stand for all of us, with Kalla at your side, facing the enemy and doing all in your power, and her power, to lead us to victory. You must be prepared for that, and only what Kalla and the Indrans show and tell you can prepare you – and enable us to meet the greatest challenge our world has ever faced or could face.”

Nestor laid it out for him, as Kalla had laid it out for Nestor – the Aurean Empire menace and the previously undercover work with the Indrans to prepare for it, and the urgency of coming out into the open now.

To say that Libanius was stunned was an understatement. He’d never had any interest in military matters, which came under the jurisdiction of the Grand Domesticos – currently Panos Dendias. It had overseen the planetary tagmata and the militia – almost a do-nothing job in these years of post-Restoration peace and prosperity. But now the new Ministry would become all-important – an office to be entrusted only to a member of the ruling family.

* * *

The die has been cast, Kalla knew. Her work was cut out for her, *their* work was cut out for them.

Tomorrow, Andros must be told what it faced. But that was only the beginning, only the what of it. Now her adopted world must find a way to deal with the *how* of it, and those who might be taking part in the ultimate battle would have to be carefully chosen... as would their successors, if that were necessary. It would take at least a generation for Andros to be ready to face any eventuality...

Let there be time, she almost prayed. *Let there be time*

Chapter 3. Waiting, Watching, Planning

Soon after Nestor had broken the news of the Aurean menace to the world, he called for a mutual defense treaty with Indra, and a new title for his son.

“Today, we enter a new era,” he told the Synod, summoned hastily to deal with the panic. “It is an era fraught with peril, but also bright with promise. Thanks to the Indrans, we have made remarkable progress in the peaceful use of new technologies. But those same technologies can be harnessed for the defense of our world, and the resources of the Indrans are still far greater than our own. Because Indra faces the same threat as Andros, a formal alliance is on our best interests.”

Libanius stood by him on one side of the podium, and Kalla on the other.

“As Minister of Defense, my son and heir will work closely with the Indrans here, and – as time and distance permit – with his counterpart on Indra itself. Kalla Zaver’el, known to all of you for her labors on behalf of past Patriarchs, will also play a vital role. You can trust me, and you can trust them to do their utmost to bring us victory when the time comes, and assure a triumphant and prosperous peace afterwards.”

Nothing like it had ever been heard of before; the people of Andros knew about other worlds, of course, but only as trading partners and only through the Scalantrans. Even the work of the Indrans on Alkmene and planetside, being funded by trade profits – which was true in a sense, but from the *Bountiful Voyager's* overall profits, not from the Androssian trade with Indra, even counting leases for mineral rights on the moons.

Nobody but Kalla and a few others knew the whole story, of course, and even as the Synod approved a treaty by acclamation, everyone understood the need for security. This was *war*, after all.

And so it began...

When Kalla brought Libanius to Alkmene, it was a momentous occasion and their departure was covered live on the newspeakers. No cargo container for the new Minister of Defense, but an Indran ship that landed at the trade fair grounds, with a crowd of tens of thousands looking on. Aircraft were a familiar sight, but no starships other than the Scalantrans' had ever been seen here before.

But Libanius himself wasn't overawed, and even made light of the occasion – if only to Kalla, after the takeoff.

"Here we are, headed for another world, and some people down below are still getting used to fastwheelers," he said. "Just last week, Verina was telling me about how one of the landed gentry at a business reception in Boreapolis, just before all this broke, complained about how they were a useless nuisance that had no business to be invented – as if the Northern Reach weren't getting anything out of the commercial transports and the high roads."

“It’s the social changes that have some people upset,” Kalla ventured. “Young people think nothing of driving hundreds of stadia from home, and if they’re so inclined they may find side roads far from home to... well, they’re called lovers’ lanes.”

“You’re hardly in a position to find fault with them.”

“I’m not. I’m only making an observation.”

The Indrans gave them a royal reception at the original base, and Libanius was suitably impressed – it was one thing to hear about what was going on there, another to see it first-hand.

He and Kalla were to be the only ones to see the secret bases on Alkmene and the other moons; as far as the public knew they were simply calling on the original base. They would appear on newspeaker casts showing only inspections of commercial ships from Indra being retrofitted as warships; nothing was said about new battle cruisers or the hornets. Nor about who was going to crew the retrofitted ships...

Nestor had agreed with Kalla at the outset to combine a seemingly free flow of information about the military buildup with secrecy about the crucial details.

Even trusted engineers working on control systems for battle cruisers and hornets would be kept in the dark about the overall design of the ships, which would be produced at different locations on Aoide and Adonia, for shipment to the primary assembly facility on Alkmene.

In time, there would be other production sites on more remote planets and moons, but that too was kept secret. Yet there was a method to the madness: control systems for the warships would be similar to those for civilian spacecraft and aircraft. Business and

personal aircraft were common now, and at need their veteran pilots could thus be trained quickly to serve on military spacecraft.

When the Aureans might arrive, no one could guess – not even the Scalantrans, although they relayed advisories from Velor about other moves by the Empire. Kalla and Nestor knew that Andros had to be ready, and together they were seeing to it. But they couldn't know whether Andros would be ready in time, however much they assured the citizenry by newspeaker and news sheets that they had matters well in hand. That was why Kalla herself undertook military training, as a pilot. Powerful as she was, she might need the edge that one of the hornets could bring her...

There was a boost to public morale when the *Bountiful Voyager* returned six years later, inbound for Velor and escorted by an Indran cruiser. The trade fair was a resounding success, with a record tally of shinefur pelts – most delivered by commercial aircraft from the Northern Reach, some with new patterns thanks to selective breeding – consigned to the Scalantran ship. The latest fashions from the Danelis family also sold well, as did new vintages of wine, culinary specialties like tetyromenous (a filo pie with three-cheese and egg fillings) and the always popular olive oil.

And so it continued.

* * *

Nestor's death came at the age of 79. He had served as Patriarch longer than any of his predecessors, having taken the throne at a mere 21, and had been admired and even beloved by three generations.

Kalla had flown straight from Alkmene to the Palace to see him, after hearing that he was near the end. Family and close friends were already there, including Libanius with

his wife and children. Likewise Procopia – now married Verina’s brother Makarios – who would soon be taking over the Danelis Transport Group.

Nestor seemed to be at peace with himself, and even with Kalla, after more than two decades of formality between them since the affair of Alexius, whose name was never mentioned at family gatherings. He beckoned her to his side now.

“I’ve just done something needful, to do right by you,” he whispered.

Kalla had no idea what he meant, until she heard from Belisarius after the funeral. He was still serving as catapan of Strymon at age 73, but left most of the day-to-day work to his son Andronikos.

“There’s something I need to discuss with you,” he said. “Can you meet me at the Prodromos in half an hour?”

That was one of the finest restaurants in the capital, featuring such traditional Romaic cuisine as yuvarelakia (simmered lamb and herb meatballs) and koptoplakous (pastries made from layers of filo with chopped nuts and honey).

When Kalla arrived, Belisarius was seated at one of the tables holding what she could see must be a patriarchal missive – it was on parchment, which was rarely used for anything in this day and age besides official business of the Palace, and even then only on special occasions. What could this be, and how could Belisarius have come by it?

“It’s about Father,” he said, without any preliminaries. “About how he died, and why. Nestor absolves you of any blame for having misled us. That it was his decision, a matter of state, and necessary at the time because of a delicate situation involving the catapan of the Northern Reach. But read for yourself.”

Kalla read through the missive, recognizing Nestor's elegant script. He must have composed it some years ago, she thought, and kept it close, and ordered it sent when the end was near. What startled her, however, was what was missing – there was nothing about Stefanos, about how she had poisoned him and all but one of the other emissaries from the Northern Reach on that fateful day more than 40 years ago. It was all about the treachery of Ennodios, and using her to send a warning to young Nestor.

She was in the clear. Nestor had absolved her with a lie – a lie she herself would never have dared utter. Of a sudden, tears came to her eyes.

Belisarius, too, began crying.

"Now we can let it all out," he sobbed.

*Only, for **me**, it's because Nestor didn't let it all out,* Kalla knew, to her shame. She had once vowed to make a clean breast to the Makropoulos family – and failed to do so. She had kept Nestor in the dark about the Aureans for decades, and yet he had never complained afterwards about the deception – and had embraced the Indrans' program to counter their threat – itself founded on necessary deception.

Only the necessary.

That was what the deceptions about the death of Nikos and the exile of Alexius and the current military program had in common.

And yet Nestor could have told the truth about how *she* had been the target of revenge in the assassination of her lover – it would no longer have been a matter of state security, even if it would have doubtless turned Nikos' family against her – and that was why her tears flowed...

Having cried themselves out, if not in common understanding of the why, she and Belisarius shared lunch, after which he caught her up on family matters. Like a new edition of Nikos' essay on the rights of women.

"The time is ripe," he observed. "With the example of Verina, more women have been going into business and careers like engineering."

"And don't forget the military. We'll soon be recruiting women and men alike for the crews of our warships. If they can operate commercial aircraft, they can fly spacecraft as well – our battle cruisers."

Belisarius suddenly frowned

"But... will making over those second-hand trading ships really be enough? How can we defeat an interstellar Empire without matching its technology? It doesn't matter to me, or to Dokia; we'll be gone by then. But our children and grandchildren..."

Kalla suddenly felt the call of Necessity, but a different *kind* of Necessity.



She reached into her briefing folder, and took out a picture that nobody outside the program was supposed to see.

“These are prototypes of attack ships we call hornets,” she said. “The Empire has nothing like them. And we are also building a fleet of battle cruisers of uruku steel. The Aureans don’t have that, either. What I am sharing with you is not meant to be shared, and you will not share it with the family.”

“Understood,” said Belisarius.

Chapter 4. Desolation, and Resolution

Another generation had passed. Kalla and Feodor were ready, as ready as they could be.

It was ironic, she thought, that the current Patriarch was a namesake for the one who had reigned when she had first arrived on the planet nearly 200 years ago. But that was just happenstance, pure chance.

As had been the death of Libanius.

The Patriarch-to-be had been grooming his younger son Menander to succeed as Minister of Defense since the age of 18 – it was natural for him to want to keep the truth about the war threat and the plans to meet that threat in the family. But he had ruled out Feodor because he was heir to the patriarchate: he wanted Feodor to have the advantage of an experienced advisor and confidant whenever the time came... which wouldn’t be any time soon.

They had already traveled together to Alkmene several times when Nestor died. If the Indrans thought Menander was too young for the job – he was still only 21 when

Libanius assumed the throne – they didn't mention it. By then, his son was also studying to be an ferounkaro pilot. It was two years later that the *Bountiful Voyager* stopped off on its outbound journey from Velor; Menander got a chance to join his father and Kalla and meet the Scalantrans in orbit, before the trade fair.

Pendril had good news: Velor had stepped up combat training for Companions, and was even screening candidates to favor those with the right aptitudes. Only those with the right aptitudes would be indentured to worlds most likely to come under attack, and there would be psychological tests to weed out any who might be susceptible to sexual subversion by the Aureans.

It was heady stuff for Menander, who was now one of the select few to share such secrets. But over the next few years, he seemed to take a more sober approach to the duties of his office. By then, he was an experienced pilot, and had practiced with other craft in space. Some years later the Indrans based on Alkmene offered the Patriarch a landing craft of his own as birthday present. He had seemingly familiarized himself with the control system, and Libanius trusted him to fly them home.

They never made it.

A subsequent enquiry could never determine what had gone wrong. Too little was left of the wreckage to determine whether there had been a mechanical failure. As for human failure...

There was panic in some quarters. Could it have been sabotaged? Could one or more of the Guild members be a traitor? Could even Amiela have been suborned? The conspiracy theories lacked any real credibility: how could any of the Indrans stationed on

Alkmene have communicated with the Empire? And Amiela was many light years away on Indra itself; no way could she have known of the plans for the anniversary present.

Yet even Kalla had been nervous, on the off chance that if the Aureans were on to the project, an invasion might be imminent. But months passed, and none came. She felt a sense of relief, which seemed to be shared by Indrans and Androssians alike.

After the shock of the tragedy, without having yet made arrangements for a funeral, or even formally taking the crown, Feodor announced his choice to succeed Menander as interim Minister of Defense: their mother Verina.

It came like a bolt out of the blue, and shocked the Synod. A *woman* in such a position? And yet it made sense: Libanius had shared everything with his wife, including all the secrets of the project. In accepting such an awesome responsibility, Verina could better deal with her grief. Feodor could do likewise. As could the people of the world he was called on to lead.

By sheer coincidence, the *Bountiful Voyager*, inbound for Velor this time, arrived a few days after the deaths of Patriarch Libanius and his son. In a gesture of solidarity with Andros, Travel Captain Azazello – successor to Vahirem – joined Trade Captain Shangrin and his personnel in making the landing. Azazello also brought Ship's Historian Pendril.

"We wish to honor the memory of your father," Azazello told Feodor.

There would not be a traditional funeral at the Palace; the pitiful remains of Libanius and Menander had already been buried at the family estate. That task had fallen to Kalla, but only because she could do it quickly; there was no honor in it, and no ceremony – that would come only with the dedication of monument stones, attended only by family and friends. It would be nothing like the Remembrance at the fairgrounds.

“Citizens of Andros,” Azazello began, looking over the crowd and knowing that his words would also reach millions across the planet by newspeakers and even the recently introduced newsv viewers. “I come here to honor the memory of your late Patriarch. But I myself am honored, and my people are honored, by your presence here today. We are proud of our trading relationship, which dates back more than 200 Galactic years, and is one of the most mutually profitable for any ship on any circuit.”

He paused for a moment.

“But these are challenging times, for both our peoples. We face a common enemy in the Aurean Empire, and word about that enemy is spreading throughout our League – which represents many thousands of ships and hundreds of worlds. In growing numbers, Scalantrans are rallying to the cause, and we are determined to lend our resources to any and all human worlds in need, even as we have with Andros and Indra. We have also reached out to Velor, homeworld of the Companions, and hereditary enemy of Aurea. I cannot speak of how your patriarchs Nestor and Libanius have prepared to meet the great challenge confronting you, but of my own personal knowledge I can assure you that they have taken heed of all the facts and all the possibilities – and that you here today and listening to me elsewhere can take heart. I thank you.”

There followed wild applause and, more importantly, a sense of relief. Azazello’s words and their manner of delivery didn’t sound very Scalantran, and none of those here today knew better than Kalla – who had actually written the speech. It had been quick work on her part, and quick study on Azazello’s, but it had served its purpose. She saw it as part of her duty, and her sense of resolve.

The eulogies were left to Feodor and his mother, and Pendril followed with some anecdotes from her own recollections and those of her predecessors about the patriarchs and Kalla and – inasmuch as they were now formally allied – the Indrans.

Yet Kalla herself shunned the spotlight. She worked better behind the scenes, and through others. She sensed, for example, that Verina's new position would strengthen the case for recruitment of more women by the Space Force. War in the heavens, after all was a matter of brains, not brawn; Andros couldn't afford to waste any of its brainpower in the challenge ahead.

When she farcalled Feodor, he agreed.

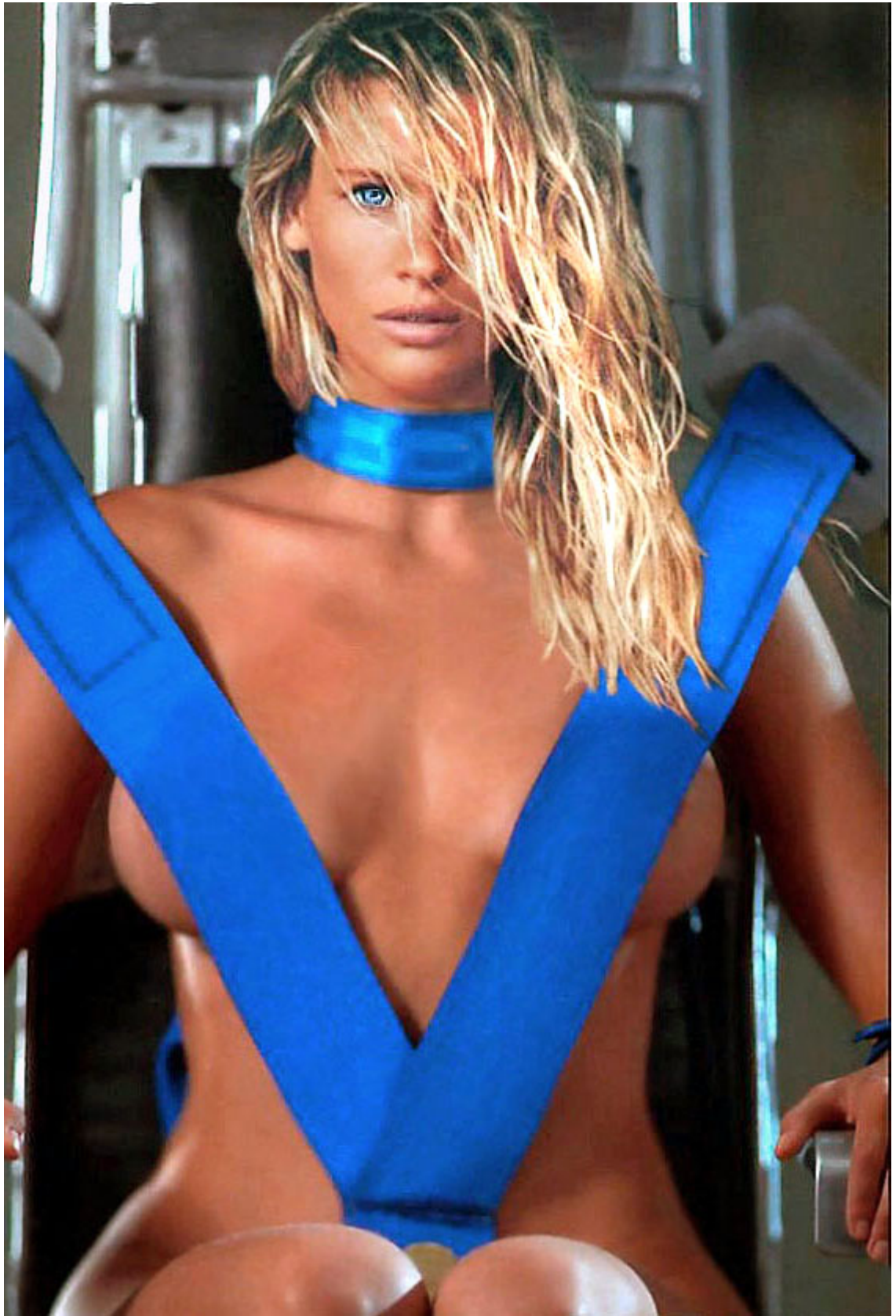
"It was what Father should have done," he said. "It might have appeared unseemly, but it was nowhere near as unseemly as naming a man of such a tender age – even if he was my uncle. But I'm not going to talk about it public, or even any more with you. Let Angelina carry the burden of my private thoughts."

Feodor's wife Marcella was a cousin on the Choniates side; she had grown up on the estate, rather than in the capital, and had busied herself with things like the fish farm rather than political intrigue. She hated to give up the fish business, which was doing better than ever now that fastwheelers could deliver fresh fish to communities far up the Great Northern Road as well as Feodoropolis.

But a related family business, swamp gas, had been abandoned; lightning power had made it obsolete. Just as well; nobody missed the smell...

* * *

Kalla spent a great deal of her time on and around Alkmene now, working with the recruits – men and women alike – to serve on the hornets and battle cruisers.



During breaks, she shared her body with unattached Indrans. The last thing she needed was to become too attached to an Androssian lover, or incite jealousy among any Androssians she had to work with. The men and women of the Space Force, by contrast, were free to make temporary or lasting attachments – and in the latter case, they could even have children. That was an investment in love, but also hope – the hope that their children would have a future.

Those first recruits would probably never see combat, and that could be a problem: they had to know secrets that *nobody* back on Andros knew. Moreover, they had to be ready for action when the time *did* come. But they would know secrets that must be kept, and the only way to be absolutely certain there were no leaks was to require them to live on Alkmene and never return to Andros. Their children, too, would remain on the moon, whether or not they ever joined the Space Force.

It was a terrible thing to ask, and yet Kalla and Feodor saw no other choice. But the recruits understood; they knew what was at stake, and loved their world so much that they were willing to forsake it. They knew they could trust their Patriarch, trust Kalla – and trust that their sacrifices would not be in vain.

The men and women who served on Alkmene, who learned how to pilot the hornets and control the drone cruisers would do their duty, whatever the cost, and each generation prayed that it would be the last – that it would be the generation to finally do battle with the Aureans, to bring peace and security to Andros – and return to the homeworld they The Patriarch had promised it, and they knew he would honor that promise.

And there was the promise that Kalla herself made to them all:

“Remember that I am with you. Come the day and the hour, I will be with you.”

Part Four: The Final Battle

Chapter 1. The Day and the Hour

“Unknown objects! Code 3-22-17!”

That was all the message from the probe ship monitoring the wormhole said – and all it had to. The Aureans were here, and the Ghost Fleet was in place to meet them. As for the real fleet...

Kalla had known this day would come. So had they all. The plans had been in the works for decades, and continually updated and refined. The standing orders still stood, but the commanders had been empowered to take the initiative in the details – depending on the size of the invading force and its formation, as revealed in the message they alone could understand.

It was dumb luck that the Triple Moons – actually small asteroids – now lay on the direct path between the wormhole and Andros. What the High Command called hornets were nested in advanced battle cruisers on the sunward sides of the moons, out of sight of the invaders – who would make short work of the Ghost Fleet of converted commercial ships with obsolete weapons, programmed to respond to the Code number, the better to deceive the enemy as to the Andros’ actual capabilities.

Only crews of the Vendorian steel battle cruisers and pilots of the hornets would be risking their lives – the Ghost Ships were “manned” only by artificial brains, but really *good* ones from Indra. With luck, they might even give a good account of themselves; if

not, they'd still serve as a delaying force – not that this was considered necessary; there was more than enough time to prepare...

The wormhole was nine light hours distant, 57 billion stadia. It would take several days for the Aureans to reach the Triple Moons. That cluster was the latest position in a series of contingency plans, having replaced Exotatos, outermost planet of the system, which had moved out of position, and there had been previous plans for other planets or asteroids or none at all – those last were the scariest.

But disinformation had also been part of the preparation. Nobody knew for certain whether the Empire had placed any agents on Andros, although it seemed unlikely. So the general public, as opposed to those with an absolute need to know, had been kept in the dark. Anyone intercepting that message about “unknown objects” might have taken it as an alert to commercial shippers about stray meteors.

Kalla herself would head for the Triple Moons to take part in the coming battle. But not before calling Feodor on their private farcaller. The Patriarch, thrust unwillingly into his office by the tragic death of his father over thirty years ago, had been awaiting this day as much as she had, and at 83 he was lucky to have survived to witness it; she owed him more than just official courtesy.

“I’ll be throwing a party when I get back,” she told him – he already knew what that meant, or would guess even if he hadn’t received the Code message yet. But it wouldn’t mean anything to anyone else if she were overheard, or hacked.

Feodor hesitated for a moment, perhaps taking in what she meant, or perhaps just thinking of an innocently witty response. Then...

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world... May I have the first dance?”

* * *

Kalla had been at her home away from home when word came – suddenly, as they all knew it must. But she wasn't on break at the time, or seeking a romantic interlude. Her getaway home was a place of security, a place for work too important, and too sensitive, to be discussed anywhere else on Andros.



It had been built 31 years ago, soon after the accession of Feodor. It had been her unofficial headquarters on Andros for all those years, although she had spent most of her time on Alkmene; but now it would no longer be needed. It had served its purpose, had served its end...

Thank Skietra! Kalla thought, as she soared off into space to rendezvous with the fleet... It had been a long wait, but she was ready, able and willing...

And it was her part to make sure it all came together... the Aureans must not only be defeated, but defeated so overwhelmingly – even without any help from Velor – that the Empire would abandon its campaign of interstellar conquest. The fate of countless worlds hung on the outcome of the battle at hand.

And once the battle was won, she could have a life again...

Chapter 2. The Long Watch

Kalla had been a living legend for more than two centuries, and yet, since the accession of Feodor, she had gradually become *only* a legend to most Androssians.

Like Skietra, she thought. Had there ever *been* a Skietra? Was there any truth to the story of how her people had come to be? Yet the legend had served a purpose, and had changed history. Perhaps her own legend could help do the same.

And so Kalla had chosen to believe. She had once been a familiar figure at trade fairs, in the news sheets and, later, on the news feeds. But she had been seen only rarely in recent years, and only by a few, on the planet she had made her homeworld – in order to focus on saving that homeworld.

She had less and less time to keep her ear to the ground, or to promote progress there; progress was taking care of itself. She had to keep her ear to the cosmos, to the latest advisories from the Indrans and the Scalantrans – meeting with the latter only on Alkmene – and sharing what she learned only in private conferences with Feodor. But there was one thing she couldn't share even with him, and she had learned it only from Amiela ten years ago when her indenture had expired.

Her visit to Alkmene had been a surprise. The former Companion to the Guild had put it out that she was simply taking a vacation to celebrate her freedom, and wanted to renew old acquaintances. But she took Kalla aside, out of sight or earshot of all others, to share something that she could tell no other, and that came as an utter shock.

“I was sworn to secrecy about this when I served the Guild, and I could understand why: it could have destroyed our alliance. Only a handful of our officers ever knew about it, but here is what they knew, and trusted to me, and that I knew trust to you. The deaths of Libanius and Menander were no accident. The traitor responsible was found out, and told all that he knew before we arranged for his own ‘accidental’ death. He hadn’t known much; only his instructions, and his Aurean contact, supposedly a refugee from Myrce, who had used her... talents to suborn him had already left the planet. If he had known anything about the Empire’s plans, it would be out of date by now. Those of the Guild who dealt with him have since died of natural causes. I alone have come to tell you.”

Kalla had been speechless at first, and even after a moment, could find nothing to say but, “I understand.”

She understood how devastating the reaction on Andros would have been had the secret come out then. It would shake public confidence even now: if it happened once, people would wonder, could it happen again? The alliance of Indra and Andros was the foundation of the fleet that would confront the Empire, and likewise the modernization of the economy – both essential to the hope for the future that she and Libanius and now Feodor had fostered. Now it was her doom to bear a secret that would threaten everything she and they had worked for. Once again she must be the perpetrator of a necessary evil – and she would have to bear the terrible burden.

But she must give no outward sign of that, here or on Andros. She made a point of asking after Aglaya, Amiela's successor as Companion to the Guild, over dinner with Indran engineers. She'd already met Aglaya as a prospect when the Scalantrans had stopped by on their way out six years earlier; like others she had encountered over the years, all she knew when left Velor was that the High Council was still trying to step up the number of indentures and intensify combat training, and still worried about Aurean propaganda. No news there.

"She's fucking up a storm," Amiela told her now. "She'd heard about how great it is to work there, and she's even hosted gang bangs – those aren't fashionable among the more traditional Indrans like business people, but air and space engineers don't put much stock in tradition."

"Maybe we could try that here," Kalla quipped, in a tone between jest and earnest. Heads turned their way, and so did propositions. Kalla and Amiela found and swapped a dozen willing partners, and a good time off-shift was had by all. But for Kalla there was more to it than coming and coming with the Indran studs – there was the knowledge that none of them would remember anything but the orgy, that none would suspect that she and Amiela had shared anything else.

But would people back home suspect anything?

She was above any temptation to share her secret – she had kept secrets before, whatever the emotional cost. But could she hide the fact that she was sorely troubled from the Androssians closest to her? It would be hard enough to deal with Feodor... she thought of the Patriarch's and his family, who knew nothing about Alexius, and would know nothing of the murder of Libanius and Menander. She *owed* them.

Call it penance, although she would never let She would plead the demands on her time, and offer other plausible excuses.

So she no longer took part in Family Council meetings. It was a distraction for her, she explained, when it was her duty to give her all to the preparations for war, and in any case she had nothing useful to contribute to domestic policy issues, or to the business affairs of the family itself

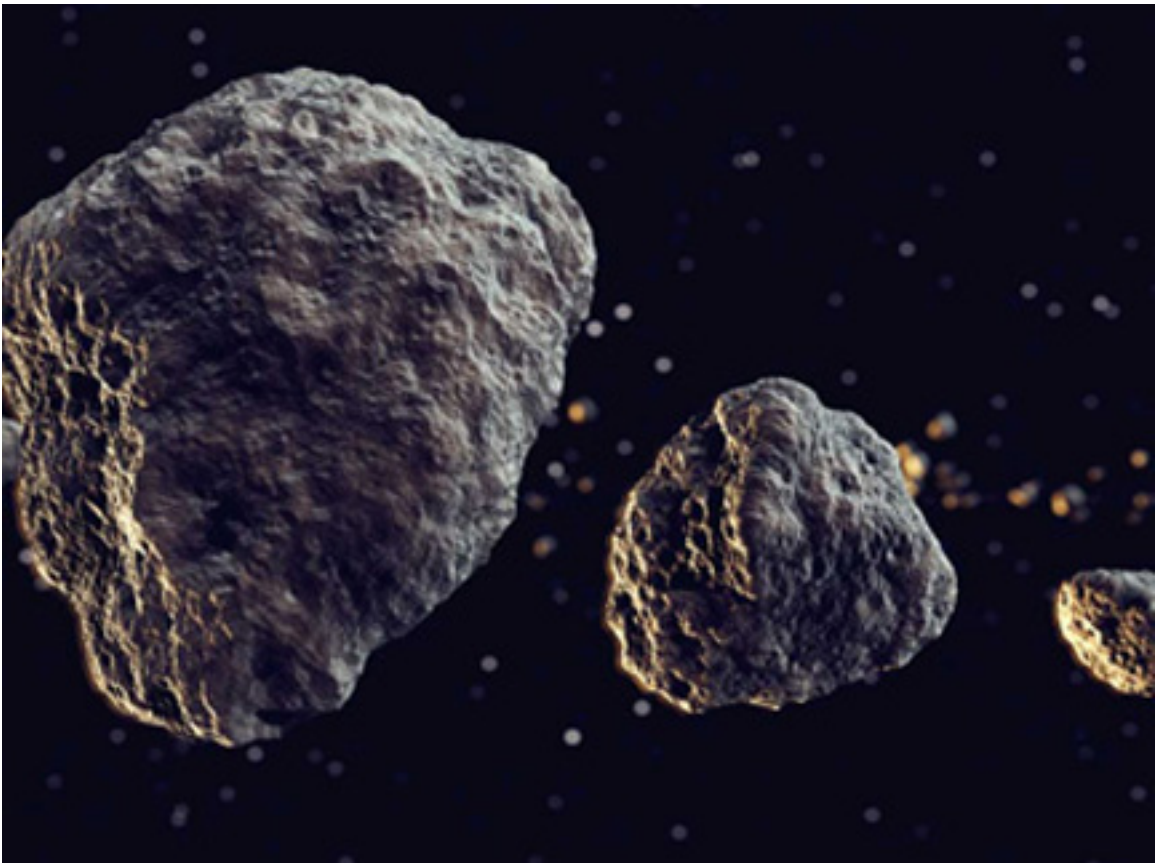
She had given up her second planetary home in Nesalonika, and drifted away from contact with the Makropoulos and Danelis families, although she kept up with the news of their involvement with the export trade, transportation and banking. From fastwheelers to airships, from lightning power to sungas fuel, they were taking care of themselves and taking care of Andros.

Of late she had found herself thinking about Alexius, a man she had betrayed out of loyalty to the Patriarch and his family. There had been no other choice, but she had hated herself for making it – and wherever he was now, he might still hate her. Had he found another life? *Could* he find one, as a male supremis in a universe of Terrans? The Scalantrans could surely enlighten her, but she had been steadfast in her determination never to ask them.

There was no one she *could* ask about her enhancement of him. Something to do with lifecyphers, obviously. She remembered how he had once pointed out the absurdity of the idea that the Galen, for all their genius with lifecyphers in creating the Velorians, couldn't have recreated their own females. He had sown in her the seeds of doubt about the whole mythology of the Galen. And yet, those very Galen had built into *her* lifecyphers the capacity to share them...

The occasion had been one of pure happenstance, and yet her kind's creators had planned for the possibility. Had it ever happened before? She had no way of knowing. Would it happen again, by accident or even design? Was this part of some greater plan, or the workings of what Alex had called Cosmognosis? Were the Velorians a part of it? Was she herself a part of it?

Kalla had pondered that many times over the years, including when she had first scouted the Triple Moons.



She would be thinking about it again when the battle was joined...

TO BE CONCLUDED