

First Protector

Book One: A World in Peril

By Shadar and Brantley

Book One of Three. A sequel to *Homecoming III* and prequel to *Incident at Madstop*, this novel plays out at the end of the Companion era of Velorian history. We see how the expansion of the militaristic Aurean Empire forced Velor to send out its Protectors in the current era. Restructured, revised and continued from the original AUOW version.



Prologue

*Scalantran Trading Update: 1013-4-0315 Posted by Senior Trade-Captain
Tithzarem, Shivangi Sector*

/MOST SECRET

We are in receipt of several reports from outer rim planets that the Aurean Empire has been testing a new and very destructive energy weapon. Technical sources suggest this may be a crude copy of the Vendorian Star'laz charged-particle. As you know, the Star'laz is a large weapon designed to burn through the hulls of shielded warships. If the reports are correct, then the Aureans have developed one or more hand-held variants.

We believe that a secret field deployment was conducted recently on Gebron with the loss of all lives and marketable equipment and tools on the mining colony. It is believed this was a final test by the Aureans prior to wider field deployment among their forces.

This so-called Garzoldan Assault Rifle, or GAR, is a quantum leap forward in deployed military power compared to any other weapon outside of Vendorian control. It is expected that an Aurean force armed with GARs will be unstoppable by any armor or weapons we Scalantrans or the humans currently possess. It remains to be determined how effective it is against Velorians. It is thus essential that we obtain and examine this weapon. It may be possible to contract the production of this weapon in quantity, both for our own protection and for use by our trusted trading partners. They could also form the basis of a highly profitable trade with human colonies as well, with estimated gross profits in the range 10 million credits per weapon, at least initially. Much larger profits will be derived if the inevitable human conflicts become destructive enough to generate additional trading requirements for re-building materials and medical supplies.

Therefore, the first of our trade ships to secure a functioning GAR will be rewarded with Trade-Intellectual Ownership of this item and receive a full 50%

front-profit claim on all future Guild sales.

/End_MOST SECRET

Factor General Bensalem, senior Scalantran official on Selene, read the report with both interest and alarm. He flicked it across the table for his colleagues to read, and they reacted with even more concern. The report was old — it had taken nearly four Terran years to find its way to their desks. Even worse, no one seemed to know how long it had taken for the original reports from Gebron to reach Tithzarem. With the vagaries of interstellar travel being what they were; the report did not include the more recent news about the disturbing conquest of Tanzrobi, which was as far from Selene as Meetpoint 15, but on a different trade route. That horrific news had landed on the Factor General's desk only a few days earlier.

Had the trade ship *Spirit of Youth* obtained a working model of the GAR as first believed, he would have been recognized across Scalantran space as a First Trader (the most illustrious Scalantran title of all). he would have already contracted out its their scientists would already be studying it. Unfortunately, the *Spirit* had arrived with only anecdotal accounts of the weapon – borne by one of the Velorian Companions and a delegation of Tanzrobians who had accompanied her. Unfortunately, the *Far Wanderer* was not privy to Velor's response, which was presumably being communicated to their Companions by couriered message crystals – the only truly secure communications system in known space.

Leaning back in his chair, Bensalem stared out the window to savor the golden dream of all traders – having control over a product so valuable that he could ask any price for it. That had proven the case with the Velorian Companions program, and thanks to the extensive trading with humans, he'd learned everything there was to know about their bloodthirstiness. Given the Aurean Empire's campaign to gather all humans under their protection (and more importantly, control), there were endless billions to be made trading such weapons to the humans. He knew of people who could reverse-engineer any weapon, and others who could mass-produce them. If he was the first to obtain a

GAR, he would not only have earned a 50 percent share of gross trade profits from his fellow Scalantrans, but he would profit even more from the factories he would build to manufacture them. For unlike most Scalantrans, who lived their entire lives onboard the Trade Ships, Bensalem liked living on a planet. Even more rare, he enjoyed interacting with the amazingly creative, half-wild humans. He loved to drink in their powerful, raw and often violent emotions. He imagined this was how his most ancient progenitors had once felt.

Bensalem smiled as he indulged himself in his latest dream of avarice. He could already see the golden leaves falling in dense groves of Denthin trees, all of which he owned. If he had his way, every leaf would be hammered from Ultrathin 24K foil.

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back, dreaming of falling into a huge pile of golden leaves and being swallowed up by their beauty.

Part One: Kevin Galton

Chapter One

Tazzi. 1488 (1013-10-333 Universal), a Terran colony approx. 170 light years from the Selene System.

I slumped into my favorite chair in the sunny corner of my office, staring at the intercepted Scalantran document on my screen. I had no idea who hacked it from the Scalantrans — they relied on auto-combusting paper to distribute their internal reports. They couldn't be electronically intercepted. This report was from Factor General Bensalem himself. He was writing about a new kind of Aurean weapon, but there was nothing in his report that described its destructive power, its range, energy source, recharging technique or, most importantly, its intended use. Yet it was obviously something the Scalantrans coveted.

Even more interestingly, this GAR was believed to be a handheld charged-particle beamer. That seemed improbable given the report also stated that it was modeled on the

Star'lanz, which was the size of a large flitter and weighted many tons, including its fusion power supply. But if the report was correct, it would be devastating. The Aurean military was already dangerous enough when armed with conventional lasers and explosive projectile weapons, but this so-called GAR, especially if it really was a hand-held beamer, would make them invincible. Or so everyone believed.

I was one of the few people who knew that a Star'lanz was powered by some sort of raw energy that generated nanograms of anti-matter, which reacted with normal matter in the air to create a beam many times more powerful than that of any other hand-held weapon. Compared to a normal projectile weapon, the Star'lanz had a very slow cycle rate: nearly thirty seconds was required for recharging between shots. Thirty seconds is a very long time in a gun fight. But that wasn't likely to matter in any gun fight...

I tossed the reader on my desk and spun my chair around to stare out the window, drinking in the riot of color. The warm Tazzian spring was working its magic annual magic — everything was in bloom. That included the lovely scholassies whose wardrobe had seemingly changed overnight from gowns and surcoats to brightly-colored blouses and very short skirts. The bright plumage of the young men who chased them was nearly as colorful. Tazzi was a very fertile world.

It took an effort of will to turn away from that light-hearted scene and pick up the Scalantran report again. He struggled to read between the lines, to tease more information from it than it actually contained. The sparseness was typical for the Scalantrans. Those inveterate traders knew something about everything, but as anyone who has conversed with a Scalantran knows, their trade updates don't give away any more than necessary to establish a claim. Unfettered competition was also a Scalantran trait.

I finally concluded that the Scalantrans had perhaps seen the after-effects of a GAR attack, and they undoubtedly had anecdotal accounts of its power — but nothing more. Anyone with a technology that advanced would surely protect it as matter of the highest priority, and the militaristic Aureans were obsessive about their security.

What the Scalantrans didn't know — and nobody here on Tazzi was about to tell

them – was that we were fortunate enough to have actually come into possession of one of the GARs, courtesy of a crashed Aurean transport that had failed to self-destruct.

Which is where I'd been brought into the picture. High-energy physics was my thing. Unfortunately the military intelligence people (what an oxymoron!) from the Armory had taken initial control of the alien weapon. And of course they tried to fire it, which resulted in severe injuries for the person holding it. Chief Armorer Hawkwood had come to ask my superior, Mitchel Vanoort, for academic help. Mitchel was the Dean of Academia Scientia, a pompous man who was obsessed with fund-raising and politics. But he was hardly an idiot.

Mitchel started the game by objecting, claiming that Oxbridge University couldn't possibly get involved in military matters. It would go against the Third Protocol of the Curia Populi – which had mandated a total separation between the Military Service and the Intellectual Service.

That was just the opening move of their chess game. John Hawkwood wasn't the type to be deterred by bureaucracy or rules, being that he was answerable only to the Minister of Defense himself. But he knew how the game was played. He had arranged for a substantial "donation" to the university Research Fund through a third party, and suddenly the Protocols became a frivolous detail.

That's when I was brought into the picture. Mitchel summoned me to his office and introduced me to Hawkwood. We started with the usual formalities and rules, but by the end of that fateful meeting I'd been directed to use all the resources of High Energy Physics to develop a suitable form of armor to defend against the GAR. That's also how I came into possession of this Scalantran report about their Trade Intellectual Orders. The document itself had been transmitted from Tithzarem to Bensalem to Vaharem, the factor general here. From there a copy was delivered to Military Intelligence, although Vaharem didn't know about that. Somebody in Cathedral Square knew how to purloin the report. What mattered was that Hawkwood had both the report and the weapon. I was supposed to figure things out from there.

Hawkwood punched up a video showing the Armory's first attempt to fire the GAR, and we all watched it in horror. The visuals showed a small cloud of charged particles

surrounding the weapon as it prepared to fire, and those stray particles proved energetic enough to strip skin and flesh from the shooter's hand, physically preventing him from pulling the trigger. The poor bastard had lost his arm from the elbow down.

The Armory's second attempt involved encasing a soldier in full battle armor to deflect the charged particles, but the pre-firing impulse heated the armor enough to cause third-degree burns. Subsequent attempts to remotely trigger the weapon via a robot failed. The weapon seemed to sense whether it was being held by a biological or an automaton.

End result was two badly injured men... and they never got a shot off.

"You should have started by removing the casing and finding out how the thing works," I said. "There's no way we can assure the safety of the shooter if we don't really know what we're dealing with."

"We can't risk the integrity of the device," Hawkwood said with a shake of his head. "There is evidence the Aureans installed an anti-tampering device, perhaps a self-destruct like the ones on Vendorian weapons. Supposedly this GAR is a crude copy of a Vendorian weapon."

"A Star'lanz," I nodded. "Vendorian selfies can be defeated if you know how. Odds are that they copied those from the Vendorians as well. Who decided the weapon couldn't be risked?"

"Higher authority."

Cathedral Square again.

I pressed Hawkwood, but he refused to say any more, either because he'd been told not to or because he didn't know. That's how the meeting ended.

One thing was clear to me as Hawkwood left – he was buying deniability. I was on my own. He'd classify all our findings and data if we succeeded, and he'd deny any knowledge of our work if we didn't.

My team was clearly expendable in that bastard's eyes. If I'd had any sense I'd have refused to become involved in this folly. But as usual, my professional curiosity was stronger than my common sense.

I arrived at the University lab the next morning to find a heavily armed military security detail delivering the weapon. They said they'd been ordered to stay and keep guard over it, day and night. I wasn't happy about that, but had no luck convincing them to leave. Higher authority again.

As soon as everyone on my staff staggered in, blurry-eyed as usual from late night work, I called an emergency meeting. Once everyone was gathered, I had the guards bring the weapon into the room on a trolley. We gathered around, staring in awe at the most evil-looking weapon we'd ever seen. It had the malevolent look of something out of a horror movie, with dials and wires and various protuberances that made no sense at first. This was not a weapon invented by or intended to be carried by a human.

Part of the reason for that was the weapon's sheer weight: nearly a quarter ton, presumably most of it due to some kind of energy coupler – it presumably used an external power source. It was huge, more than a meter and a half long and a quarter of that in width.

I told my staff that our orders were to find a way to protect the shooter from one of these. I showed them the video from the Armory – the one where the shooter's arm was eaten away to leave a bare skeleton. One of my grad students threw up and the rest of them got focused in a hurry after I told them we were going to figure out how to fire it safely.

We started off with a Grade Three forcefield layered over an inch of insulated and heat-reflective body armor. That made the weapon even heavier, but the hope was that it would stop the charged particles, albeit while generating a bit of heat. Unfortunately, the first tests showed it was still emitting a powerful x-ray burst as it charged. Fortunately, the resulting dosage was low enough to allow an older man – someone who wasn't going to sire any more children — to take a few shots before requiring anti-radiation treatments.

While we worked on shielding, the mechanical team rigged up a cable and servo-pulley system to support the weapon's weight from the ceiling. That was before we discovered that the GAR had a built-in anti-grav that stabilized it whenever you switched it into targeting mode.

We worked through a series of increasingly bold experiments, and soon we were ready for a first firing. One of my older lab technicians, James Gibbons, volunteered to man it. The last thing he wanted was more children — he'd already raised six of them. The rest of us retreated to a shielded booth to stare at him through the thick, leaded glass.

The cables supported the GAR as it charged from whatever kind of internal power source it contained, all the while giving off a horrific scream that was so loud it penetrated the walls of our armored booth to make everyone's skin crawl. It sounded like someone dragging fingernails across a slate board — only at ear-bleeding volume. The anti-grav kicked in as Gibbons pulled the trigger to the first stop — targeting mode. At that point, the weapon became weightless in his arms. Even better, it locked onto and tracked whatever had been in the reticle at the time of triggering. It moved wherever the target moved, holding so tightly that Gibbons couldn't budge it off target until he released the trigger.

After practicing with it for a bit, he settled his aiming point on our prepared target, and pulled the trigger through the firing position.

Viewed from the sensors and optics, the weapon visibly enlarged as a cloud of charged particles enveloped it, and then it gave off a painfully loud shriek as it emitted a blinding beam of coherent light. The tunneling laser was so brilliant that we were all seeing black spots despite wearing the darkest glasses obtainable. Then something even brighter raced down the evacuated tunnel to burst into a ball of lightning that came simultaneously with a BOOM that flattened our clothing to our chests — the collapsing tunnel.

Yet those effects were little more than pinpricks of light compared to the blaze at the end of our two-kilometer long test range. A miniature blue-white sun exploded into life, the radiating heat melting its way through our main shields to activate the emergency shields. By the time that miniature sun blinked out, the far end of the test range was largely gone. All that was left was a crater lined with molten glass and the remains of some sagging ferro-concrete walls.

It didn't go well for poor Gibbons either, despite his armor. When we could see

again, we found him lying on the floor in a fetal position, his heart racing arrhythmically. We were damn lucky to save him with a heartstarter. It was about to time-out and declare him dead after shocking him multiple times, but on its very last try, his heart woke up to beat with only a slightly irregular sinus rhythm. The collapse of the weapon's ionization field had obviously sent a powerful electric shock through his heart, disrupting its normal electrical rhythm and shocking his nervous system into a near shutdown.

I was flabbergasted. I'd seen a Vendorian Star'lanz being fired into a similar range, and as impressive as that had been, this was orders of magnitude greater. We didn't understand how until we pulled up the real-time logs from the instruments. Those closest to the blast had detected a strong flux of sub-nuclear particles. What we had here was a molecular disruptor.

No one I knew of had ever imagined building a weapon that it could disrupt the strong nuclear force that binds atoms and molecules of normally stable elements together. The Aureans had created this weapon with a new technology, and for new use I couldn't even imagine. What targets required that kind of overload to destroy?

Obviously, we were way out of our league trying to test the GAR. We had thought we were dealing with a cruder version of the Vendorian AMAT weapons, all of which are intended for use as defensive weapons. This thing was clearly aggressive in design and far too dangerous for my HEP staff to continue working on.

I quickly asked them to lock the GAR up and put the project on hold. Helping the military was one thing, but killing my students and staff and possibly destroying part of the campus was something else entirely.

The guards who were guarding the weapon informed Hawkwood of my decision before they could pack the GAR up for transport, and he buzzed my comm a few minutes later. We had an angry discussion where he demanded I continue our work, and I refused. He refused to remove the GAR from my lab, and said he was sending over more guards to ensure we kept working with it. We were both loudly cursing each other when he rudely clicked off. I cursed myself as I collapsed into my chair in frustration. Hawkwood was not a good man to make an enemy of.

Me and my damn temper. I'd just ensured that future decisions about the GAR were going to be kicked upstairs. Worst thing I could have done.

To no surprise, I soon had an incoming urgent call from Mitchel. He ordered me to meet him in his office immediately. I told him I'd get there as soon as I could, and then took my time to make sure my team was securing the firing range and downloading all the data to both the normal and my secret archive. I was a full professor, and I didn't appreciate being ordered around, and I didn't leave my data solely in the clutches of any institution.

I was expecting Mitchel to be irate when I finally arrived, and was ready to fight about my minor insubordination, but he was preternaturally calm. That wasn't a good sign. He normally made a big deal out of little things.

More evidence of power from on high. I was out of my league in more than one way.

Our meeting started just like those little talks he had with each of us from time to time. The kind of talk that starts with a friendly question about how my career and tenure prospects were proceeding. As if the bastard didn't know... he controlled both of them. To my surprise, Mitchel handed me a glass of amber-colored brandy and then slowly settling in an overstuffed chair on the other side of the fireplace. He motioned for me to sit on the couch opposite him.

I slouched into a corner of it, thankful that it nearly swallowed me up. This wasn't going to be fun.

We began talking about everything except the subject at hand, as was typical of Academia meetings — don't be the first one to bring up any unpleasantries. The exact opposite of how things worked in commercial business. Usually it didn't bother me, but today I wanted to see how big a hammer Mitchel was going to hit me with.

Finally, asked: "So, what are the prospects for mitigating the electrical conduction effects, Kevin? I understand your assistant got a nasty shock."

"Nasty?" I glared. "The man is lucky to be alive and might have permanent cardiac

scars.”

“It’s a weapon, Kevin. Mistakes happen.”

“Not this time. This weapon has a way to lock out if it doesn’t sense a humanoid bio-electric field, so it has to be hand fired. But its very leaky — radiates all kinds of fields and at such an intensity that we don’t have adequate shielding or armor to protect the shooter from the effects. We’ve never perfected unidirectional shields, so its essentially guaranteed to disable and likely kill anyone whose shield allows them to fire it.”

Mitchel nodded slowly, acting as if he accepted that statement at face value. Reaching down, he slowly turned the bottle of brandy around. I was stunned as the most famous label in the history of Tazzian brandy came into view: Excelsior!

This bottle had to be a hundred years old and was expensive beyond measure.

“I know how much you appreciate the finest brandy, Kevin, so I broke out a bottle of my best stuff. I currently own all the remaining stock of Excelsior. Eleven cases, to be exact.”

I could barely imagine anyone owning the bottle in front of me, let alone eleven cases. I lifted my amber-filled glass, and closed my eyes as I slowly inhaled the complex aroma. For a brief moment, I was transported back to the St. Justus monastery in the Piton Mountains. I’d spent a six-month sabbatical searching for the origins of Tazzian brandy, a pursuit that was as distant from the study of physics as possible. While I’d sampled a lot of extraordinary bottles on that sabbatical, I’d never found anything as exotic as Excelsior.

I turned the heavy, leaded glass around to study the reflections from all sides, viewing it with all the reverence of a talisman from the gods themselves. Its viscosity and color were amazing.

“I didn’t think any of this stuff still existed,” I said in awe. My hand was trembling.

I couldn’t imagine how high Mitchel’s contacts had to be to buy the entire planet’s stock of Excelsior. *Really* high up. Like the top. Rumor had long said that the Treasury had control of the items that had been confiscated when the various monasteries had

been shut down decades ago. But neither of us was about to speak of such things here.

Mitchel closed his eyes and took a tiny sip from his glass, then leaned back, eyes still closed, smiling as he savored the complex flavors. After a very long moment, his eyes slowly opened to focus on mine.

“It is far better than even you can imagine, Kevin.”

I steeled my will. I could imagine a lot. But if I gave in on the brandy then I was ultimately going to cave on the issues. He’d have bought me with a few ounces of brandy. I clenched my teeth as I lowered the glass to the table.

“So back to the GAR,” he said, acting as if he hadn’t read my body language. “So far you’ve merely described the problem. Now, how do we go about solving it?”

I was grinding my teeth now, wondering at the same time if he was being deliberately obtuse. I shook my head, only to pick up the rich scent of the brandy. There was no way I could stay angry while inhaling the exotic aroma of the brandy. It was even getting hard to focus. Excelsior was rumored to have a mild psychoactive effect due to some of its more exotic ingredients and maybe I was inhaling those.

“I can’t... I mean I simply don’t see a way, Mitchel. As I said, we can’t shield the ionization field without first encasing the shooter in a full body conduction suit. But then we get bio lockout. It was clearly designed to be wielded only by a Supremis.”

“Surely there are other approaches you could try?”

I shook my head vigorously. “Not without significant risk to our staff or students. We have a responsibility to return the weapon to the Armory and tell them it’s simply too dangerous to test. This is a purely offensive weapon.”

Mitchel frowned, clearly as disappointed with my answer as the Chief Armorer had been.

“And here I am, Kevin, ready to name the department head of HEP. A man who, of course, must have a clear vision for the future of Tazzian physics. A man who doesn’t know the meaning of the word impossible.”

I glared at Mitchel as his words hit home like a slap on my face. The department head job had been open since Ed Sanders died. I had long been the leading candidate for the job. My only real competition was Hendrickson, a smiling, convivial professor whose sole talent (in my opinion) was politics. He taught the entry level physics courses at the university, and was universally hated by his abused students.

“Don’t look so surprised,” Mitchel smiled as he saw the sour look on my face. “The feuding between you and Hendrickson has put the entire department on edge. I need to resolve it.”

I pulled my hand from the glass, never having taken a sip. My hand was shaking harder now. Mitchel’s threat and promise was clear enough, so much so that my dark half lusted to reach out and smash his smug face. Thankfully, my better half won as it always must. Still, my eyes were burning with undisguised anger as I looked up at him.

“I had assumed that decision was going to be made rationally, Dean Mitchel, but whoever winds up as department head changes nothing when it comes to testing the GAR. It’s still going to injure or kill our people if we try to test it further.”

Mitchel sensed my mood, and shifted gears so smoothly I didn’t see it coming. “But think of the power of that weapon, Kevin! A single shot annihilated the end of your strongest firing range. Given the power of that thing, the Armory will never accept your failure.”

I stared at him for a moment, my blood boiling as his words stabbed me like a sword. “*Failure,*” I shouted, leaping to my feet as my temper got the best of me. I stood menacingly over Mitchel. “*That bloody thing damn near killed one of my staff, Mitchel. You think we could have just had him wear rubber boots? Let the fucking Armory sacrifice their soldiers.*”

“Please, please, sit back down, Kevin,” he said with a gentle wave of his hand, his voice smooth and controlled despite my outburst. “I understand your concerns, surely I do, your emotions as well, but we both know the Armory isn’t qualified to research such an advanced weapon. We have to approach this like the scientists we are.”

I slumped back down to sink into his obscenely deep couch, the strength draining out of me. As usual, my anger faded as fast as it hit me. Mitchel was right as far as that went — the Armory had no expertise for this kind of work, but I had my students and staff to consider. This was beyond all of us.

He suppressed a smile as he watched me. “Discovering the secrets of the GAR will give us a chance to guide the development of any derivative weapons, Kevin. How long have we talked about bringing more accountability to the Armory? Now is our opportunity.”

I swirled the precious brandy in my glass, and felt myself weaken. I’d said those words so many times. Still, a part of me was screaming to just stand up and walk out the door. And I might have if not for the Excelsior. No matter what I had to endure with this bastard, he wasn’t taking this from me. My hand steadied as I took a tiny sip, and an explosion of wondrously complex flavors woke up inside my mouth and nose, the rush nearly taking the top of my head off. That delicious fire burned its way to my toes, and then radiated outward to fill me with a strange sense of lightness and energy. I briefly felt as if I was floating on thin air. It was a great mystery how the monks had imbued this kind of magic into a liquor. The only analysis I’d seen had suggested the drug wasn’t Terran in origin.

“Besides, Kevin,” Mitchel continued. His words floated toward me as if vibrating through a veil of light. It was all I could do to control the almost orgasmic delight of the brandy. “You’ll find life working for Hendrickson distinctly uncomfortable if I make him department head. Not to mention missing out on the department head’s share of Excelsior. Hate to see this divine brandy going to him. Hendrickson’s palate is better trained for cheap beer.”

Reality crashed back in as his words hit home, extinguishing my delicious high. It was left staring at Mitchel, mouth open, the luxuriant flavors and heady rush of the brandy turning sour in my mouth. I felt hot anger rising. He was using Excelsior to bribe me now?

“I can always quit,” I said angrily. “There are other fucking universities with research departments.”

“None that would offer you a position, Kevin. Not after the Armory declares you a security risk.”

I gripped my heavy leaded glass so tightly I nearly crushed it. I had a brief fantasy about throwing it through the window behind Mitchel and then stalking out of his office, my scribbled resignation lying on his desk. That would be so sweet.

Despite my red face and throbbing temples, Mitchel’s voice remained calm, his face expressionless. “Besides, it would be exceedingly sad to see you give up such a promising career in physics. You are by far our best researcher. By far.”

I just glared at him, suddenly realizing how far he was willing to take this game. Still, my stubbornness won out as it always did when I got angry. I started to shake my head. Mitchel wisely shifted gears before I could turn and stalk away.

“But let’s assume for the moment that I’m completely wrong, Kevin. Let’s say you could go out and find another research job. That still doesn’t solve the real problem.”

“It fucking well solves mine...” I blurted out as I stood.

Mitchel vigorously shook his head. “It doesn’t. The survival of our planet hangs in the balance. If the Aureans come at us with these weapons, our soldiers will die horribly. We must have a defense, and clearly you understand these kinds of anti-matter streams better than anyone else on Tazzi’s World.”

The bastard! As if my career wasn’t sacrifice enough? Now he had to toss in the whole fucking planet?

“So says the Armory?” I spat out. “They always see bigger weapons as the answer to all problems of planetary security. Has anyone tried to talk to the Aureans?”

“You’re forgetting the asteroid mines, Kevin. Rumors say the miners have found xintanite ore, the critical ingredient in Vendorian steel. That is going to make us a target for aggressors like the Aureans.

“Then stop the mines,” I said.

Mitchel held his arms out to his sides, palms up. “The Armory lusts for Vendorian

steel. We can take advantage of that. If we are in the driver's seat on the weapon, we could have a continuing influence over all their activities."

How long had we dreamed of bringing those bastards under some kind of civilian control? But not this way.

"And if I refuse?" I asked.

He shrugged and turned his back to me as he walked over to stand before a window. "Then I'll be forced to promote Hendrickson to department head and let him lead the GAR project. Something we'll all be poorer for."

"Bollocks! There's no way Adams will ever agree to this madness. We all know Hendrickson is an idiot."

Mitchel spun around. "He is a Tazzian first and foremost, Kevin. He values our world's security and survival ahead of any personal goals."

"Right. So much so that he's willing to kill our students for this so-called security," I growled. "I want to hear this decision from Adams."

"Be my guest," Mitchel shrugged. "Feel free to use the comm on my desk."

I called his bluff and walked over to pick up the comm and asked for a video call with Jeremy Adams, the University President. Jeremy was the one who'd recruited me to teach here.

Mitchel wore an infuriatingly insolent smile as he sat back in his chair, calmly sipping his brandy, eyes closed.

Adams answered on the eighth chime, and I launched into my rant without the usual pleasantries. He listened for a few minutes and then interrupted me.

"I'm sympathetic, Kevin. And you do make some very good points. Under normal circumstances, I would most certainly agree with everything you say. But these are not normal times. Rumors of the asteroid mines have already leaked. We now have to consider the future of all Tazzians. Uncovering the secret of this Aurean weapon might be your ultimate calling in life, Kevin. You could assure the future safety of our entire

planet.”

I stared at his image on the comm screen in disbelief. Damn it. Hawkwood or somebody even higher up had already gotten to him.

“So, the upshot is that I either lead the effort or Hendrickson will?” I demanded. “And in the latter case, my career is ruined. Is that it?”

“I know this is very hard, Kevin, but these are desperate times. Global Watch claims these Aureans are likely to become the scourge of the entire galaxy if we don’t find a way to stop them now.”

My emotions rose again. “All by ourselves? Global Watch is a bunch of idiots who are always looking for ways to spend billions of credits in support of the Armory’s dubious defense projects.”

“There are those who would disagree. Vehemently,” he replied.

I put the phone on private mode, and a wall of opaqueness dropped over me, blocking outside light and sound. “Look, Jeremy,” I continued, “you know that Hendrickson would do anything Mitchel asks him to, and Mitchel is only interested in the millions of new funding the department could get. Plus Hendrickson doesn’t know half what I do about managing high-energy ion streams.”

“I disagree with you on Mitchel’s motivations; he is a patriot and he has the best interests of the University in mind. All of Tazzi in fact. But I do understand your concerns about Hendrickson. Which is why I’m appealing to you, not as your superior but as your friend. We have to protect our planet. You are the only one I trust to do that.”

The bastard. He’d let me neatly corner myself. God knows what Hendrickson and the Armory would do together. Probably blow a hole clear through the planet, killing God knows how many soldiers and students — all in the name of “patriotism.”

Jeremy saw the look on my face. “I see that you now understand what’s at stake, Kevin. Stop by my office tomorrow and we’ll see if there is anything more the University or the Armory can do to assist your research.”

I felt numb as I slowly nodded. I turned off the privacy field to find myself facing Mitchel. He was trying not to smile as he rose to walk over to offer his hand. “No hard feelings, Kevin. We just needed to impress on you the importance of this. Research on the GAR is far too important to let personal feelings get in the way.”

I wanted to put my fist into his smug face. Instead, I gritted my teeth as I shook his hand. His cold hand reminded me of a dead lizard.

Chapter Two

The Armory sent over their best engineers and techs to help with the GAR. I sent them away; I was no more willing to sacrifice them than I was my own staff. Instead, I asked everyone to focus on upgrading the forcefield and change to a ceramic-iron armor to better handle the electrical field and the heat. That and build a suitable outdoor range with ceramic-steel targets.

Lastly, I told them I planned to fire it myself. “I’m bigger than anyone else here, and my heart is strong,” I argued. “Between the improved shielding and my mass, I suspect I’ll be better able to handle the surge.”

There was more to it than that, a lot more, but no one here knew my secret. If they had, I wouldn’t be here.

We worked around the clock to improve the shields and armor and build the firing range, and after two weeks of frantic work we were ready for the next test. I squeezed into the flexible metal suit and had my team attach grounding straps to my wrists and ankles. The supposed goal was to direct the current away from my heart, even though it wasn’t likely to hurt me. But I had to make a show of it, so I insisted we have a doctor standing by with a crash cart. Sometimes keeping my secret is a real burden.

The weapon weighed more than 500 pounds. I could lift that, but once again, my damned secret. Instead, I used the same carbon-fiber thread we’d rigged earlier to suspend it. When I powered the weapon up, I was dismayed to feel a prickling buzzing sensation from the charging field. I hadn’t expected it pass so easily through the armor

and improved force field. It wasn't unbearable, but this was just a taste of what was to come.

I swiveled the GAR back and forth on its cable support to get a feel for it, and then aimed it at the new targets we'd prepared. I held my breath, and pulled the trigger to the first click. The weapon froze where I was pointing it, and the tingling buzz of a poorly modulated anti-grav field made my teeth ache. Typical for a compact anti-grav. Satisfied, I took a deep breath and held it while I pulled the trigger the rest of the way.

The hammer of doom crashed down on my head, sending sparks of unbearable pain racing through my head. Everything went black for a moment, and when I woke up my entire body felt as if I'd pinched a nerve: that kind of numb, ache that I hate so much. But I was breathing and my heartbeat, while racing, wasn't erratic. My special genetics had once again served me well, although I couldn't tell anybody *that*.

I pushed those observations behind me as I squinted through my dark glass to see a small fireball still glowing downrange. I pulled off the glasses and looked at the camera monitor next to me. I could see a bright light shining down a perfectly circular hole through the target — which was 50 inches of high-carbon steel. I pivoted the camera and raised it to examine the backstop. There was a hole through it as well, and the outside wall of the range. I was seeing sunlight in the hole? Thankfully the back wall of the lab was against a small hill that was restricted during tests. I switched to the outside camera to see a spray of molten metal extending across the grounds, through the fence and splattered across a large area of the hillside. A quick scan of the instruments revealed that the weapon had briefly heated the target to an astounding one million degrees. And once again, disruption had been detected. It seemed impossible that an AMAT weapon could be so small and deliver such a focused beam. AMATs usually just go boom, but the GAR's laser beam had somehow focused the matter/antimatter reaction within its own confines. Fantastic.

Once things cooled down a bit, the Armory techs came with a hoist to retrieve the GAR. Several of my students helped strip off my armor, but by that time the pain was gone. More than gone. I felt incredible, full of energy and strangely a bit turned on if truth be told. It was as if the field from the GAR had somehow energized me. That had to be

more strangeness-given genetics — but again, I couldn't tell the medics that. I suspect a human shooter would have been devastated.

The team studied the data for most of that night, along with high-speed cameras. The weapon clearly emitted an extremely powerful beam that created an evacuated, uncharged tube from the weapon to the target. The laser itself was more powerful than any hand-held device on Tazzi. But the weapon's main punch still came from whatever it propelled down the evacuated tube. The main destructive effect came from the heat of nuclear annihilation, with the resulting energy release nuclear-grade but still focused closely. Definitely something I'd never seen before.

It was clear now that if we were to have any hope of stopping this thing, we were going to have to deflect the disruption beam. A shield for that didn't exist, not even in the Vendorian catalog, and they were the most advanced weapon designers in the galaxy.

I had my team write up a preliminary report and submitted it to the Armory. More and more I realized that we were way over our heads here. I was going to need a Vendorian engineering team to figure this out.

To no one's surprise, the generals promptly rejected my report again. They claimed we'd failed because we used obsolete shield generators and ordinary target materials. They claimed to have new shield technology that was too classified for my team to have ever seen it.

That surprised me — in my line of work, everyone had heard at least whispers about the work being done in other groups. I hadn't heard anything about new shield tech. I called some former students who now worked for the Armory, but they wouldn't confirm or deny anything. I did learn, however, that they were working directly with a Vendorian engineer.

Another impossibility. How could they transport a Vendorian here without the Scalantrans knowing? Diplomatic ship?

This was getting even scarier. The Armory and the Vendorians working together without Scalantran support?

The Armory brass got wind of my inquiries and sent a team over to fill me in on the particulars. After all, I had the GAR. They made me sign a pile of forms that could get me locked up for life if I violated their security. Still, new tech or not, I told them that anything they were building was useless, unless perhaps they'd found a way to also manufacture Vendorian steel. That material (which wasn't really steel despite the name) was unique in being stable even when in contact with nuclear energy. I'd never heard of any Vendorian steel on Tazzi, other than a few tiny research samples, but maybe the Vendorian had brought some with him. Curiouser and curiouser.

Once my signed forms had been processed, Chief Armorer Hawkwood invited me over for a little tour, which turned into a shuttle ride into high orbit. There he showed me his pride and joy — the *Admiral Kirkland*, a massive forcefield-protected warship stationed in orbit as part of the planet's security cordon. The warship had triple-thick ablative armor overlaid with a ceramic and carbide layer which in turn was enveloped in a Grade 8 forcefield — the largest force field projector they could carry into orbit. Further, a second powerful magnetic shield surrounded the entire ship, all of it designed to deflect nuclear detonations and charged-particle weapons. Most impressively, it had a very thin layer of Vendorian steel coating it. It was no more than a few atoms thick, but it had cost them more than the rest of the ship combined.

I was more than impressed, but I still worried about testing the GAR on it while it was crewed. The Armory smirked at my naivety, convinced that their ship was invulnerable. Besides, they said, how could they run a warship without a crew? We argued back and forth until Mitchel got involved again. He negotiated a compromise: only two techs would stay on board to monitor the fusion engines, and they'd wear battle armor and have life pods close by. If there was even a hint of trouble, they could evacuate the ship in seconds.

Once again, Mitchel had cornered me with my own demands.

I decided that the test firing should come from the open shuttle bay of a patrol ship positioned three miles away. It took some doing to stuff myself and my improvised armor into their largest pressure suit, but we managed. The Armory had insisted I fire a full five-second burst, so I set that on the GAR's data pad. The GAR was easier to handle in the

micro-gravity, at least until its crude anti-grav cut-in. It ran so raggedy that the patrol ship's own anti-grav went out of calibration, causing the ship to gyrate around until the pilot took manual control. Fortunately, the GAR stayed locked on the center of the warship's hull.

I gritted my teeth and pulled the trigger home.

As before, I blanked for a moment, and when I came around, filled with that terrible numbing, burning, itching nerve pain again, I saw that the *Admiral Kirkland* was still in one piece. There were a few sparks around the impact point. Nothing more.

Was that Vendorian steel layer really that good?

That's when I saw the first sign of trouble. Plumes of gas were escaping the warship. As I stared, a brilliant red glow began traveling both ways from the impact point, the windows lighting up as the flames morphed into a superheated shockwave blast that vomit plasma and half-melted equipment into space.



The patrol ship pilot was no dummy, and he thrust away at full power as the massive warship started to come apart. I dangled out the open bay door, hanging on my

harness as I watched the massive warship swell into a gigantic fireball that started to rush toward us. My tethers nearly snapped as the pilot went to emergency power, pulling us away just before that horribly beautiful ball of plasma reached us. I cringed as I thought of the two men who'd been aboard — there was no way they could have escaped that large an explosion. Clearly, the GAR had initiated a chain reaction annihilation of the bulkheads and equipment, the violent reaction over-pressuring the hull until it burst.

By the time we got back to the orbiting station, that great rotating wheel in the sky, the military was in a full-on state of panic. Some senior officers found us and swore all of my team to absolute secrecy. One word, and they promised we'd rot in some jail cell for the rest of our lives. In solitary confinement.

Astoundingly, the Armory seemed intent on hiding the loss of a capital ship from the *Curia Populi*, our planet's supreme leadership council. Could they even do that?

I decided not to even ask. I'd long ago learned to never get in the way of a government bureaucrat who is trying to save his own ass. Was it even the *Curia Populi* they were most worried about? I heard some people whispering a name: Gazrall. Some said the *Curia Populi* was in his pocket.

Chapter Three

I wasn't going to find those answers in space, and I wasn't going to say anything once I got back planet-side. I struggled with guilt over the deaths of those two men, but I couldn't tell anyone why I was so upset. I rationalized that I'd done everything I could, but I couldn't get my head around the Armory's "hide their head in the sand" approach.

The only good thought was that the Armory was running scared about the loss of the *Kirkland*. That placated me for a few days, but then a sense of angry despair began to grow. I had personally failed my planet. If the Aureans arrived here while armed with this weapon, we'd be helpless to resist them.

My every dream was filled with images of that huge ship exploding and of the men inside vaporizing, never knowing what had hit them. I tried to tell myself that it wasn't my

fault. The Armory hadn't listened to me. I'd actually saved hundreds of lives by insisting the ship be mostly emptied of crew. Besides, this had become a military/political matter now. Highest Top Secret. Cathedral Square was firmly in charge.

Yet I couldn't leave it alone.

Without effective shields, our world would fall to the Aureans, just like Tanzrobi and the other worlds we'd heard about — some of them destroyed down to the last woman or child. We didn't even have the *Admiral Kirkland* any more to draw the Aureans away from the planet.

We were completely naked.

Now I became the one arguing to continue the research, but no one would listen to me. Mitchel and Adams looked at me blankly, claiming to have never heard of such a weapon before turning their backs. They weren't going to risk their lives by violating Most Top Secret.

"Are you trying to get arrested?" Adams once whispered after I pressed the matter too hard. "Are you trying to get us all arrested?"

Still, I couldn't let it go. I lay awake nights struggling with ever more radical ideas for a shield, often rising in the middle of the night to run to my office and run simulations on ablative materials, reflective materials, polarized shields, phase-shift shields. I was so focused on finding some kind of defense that I neglected my other research and even failed to show up to teach some of my classes. Hendrickson of all people had to cover for me. Word got out that I was ill.

Every new idea that I ran through the simulation models turned out to be a dead end. I grew more and more obsessed with the GAR, working day and night now, my world narrowing down to my simulations and my lab tests. Surely there was some way to keep it from disrupting ordinary matter? If it could focus its effects into a beam, there should be a way to unfocus that beam as well.

It was late evening on a Saturday when I heard a strong knock on my door. I ignored it, just like all the other knocks that had come and gone recently. My research

assistants had learned by now to shove food or paperwork under my door and then go away.

But this visitor kept knocking and knocking.

I finally leaped up from my desk to barge across the room, angrily jerking the door open as I began cursing, giving whoever was there hell for violating my privacy. But my angry words barely made it out of my mouth before a tall, powerfully-built woman pushed her way into the room.

Holy shit! Jana Sunderland?

I hadn't seen Jana in ten years. We'd been an item back during our candidate days, but then I went off to grad school and she married this guy who could buy her the things she wanted but didn't want to work for. At least that's how I saw it. Rumor was that she was extremely wealthy now.

"Kevin, baby, you're just the man I need," she smiled. Her breath smelled of booze.

Not a good sign with Jana. She was a lousy drunk, even though she was great at other things. Like filling her outfit and... but I wasn't in the mood.

I tried to push her back to the door, but she managed to slip past me before I could stop her. Jana had been born on Zeta-5, and had moved here with her family at the age of ten. Like all heavy-gravity Zetans, she was profoundly muscular, but unlike her fellow short, stocky Zetans, she'd sprouted like a weed under the light gravity of Tazzi, growing into a two-meter tower of muscle. That had been a real turn-on for me, given that she was the closest thing I could find to a Prime or a half-Prime here.

But she'd also been pretty kinky back then. Nothing I couldn't handle, but it got to be pretty annoying. And now she was showing her old form, or reverting to it. Before I knew what was happening, she'd spun me around and fastened a pair of zip-cuffs around my wrists, trapping my arms behind my back.

The she stepped back and smiled at me mischievously.

"Your place is a mess, and so are you."



“Look, Jana, I’m fine, I’m just working really hard... please leave.”

She ignored my protest, and instead tore off my filthy shirt, ripping the sleeves apart.

“What the bloody hell...!” I cursed, trying to twist away from her.

She laughed and kneeled down to unbutton my trousers, and then jerked them down, also tearing off my three-day old underwear. I felt completely helpless as she tossed me on her shoulder and carried me naked out the door and down the hallway toward the nearest communal shower.

“Help, I’m being abducted,” I called out to a grad student who was walking down the hall.

He just laughed, finding it amusing to see his missing professor being carried naked down the hallway by a woman who looked like she belonged in a wrestling ring.

Jana stuffed me into a shower before slipping out of her clothing to join me. Warm water, slippery soap and her muscular yet astoundingly curvaceous body worked its usual magic, smothering my protests as my long denied libido woke up with a vengeance. Her large boobs stood out high and firm on her chest, seemingly immune to the comparatively weak gravity of Tazzi, nipples hard and pointed. Zetans are a testament to the ultimate limits of human potential. At least, short of the Supremis.

“Oh my, you aren’t dead after all,” Jana laughed as she wrapped her strong, soapy fingers around my burgeoning erection as she carefully washed my body. She closed her hand to hold me more tightly than an ordinary man could withstand. She alone knew of my secret.

“Get the cuffs off me,” I groaned. “I’m not going anywhere now.”

She used her fingerprint to deactivate them, and I used my freedom to grab her ass as I hiked her body up against the shower wall, fully prepared to take her the way I’d done so many times before. Jana had always liked making it in the shower, and her ass felt just as tight as it had a decade ago. She’d continued to work out while I’d languished away in dark laboratories and my cluttered office, rarely even seeing the light of day. She

used her superior strength to spin me around and shove my face against the shower wall, using her soapy hands to scrub my back as she whispered fiercely in my ear. “I’m married. Remember?”

“You didn’t feel very fucking married when you were feeling up my cock,” I said. I could still feel her sinewy hands around me, and could taste her passion. Our sex had always been wildly athletic, even animalistic in its fervor. She was the only woman on Tazzi who was strong enough to handle me without my holding back. And she could handle all of me, which was also rare.

“Sorry, but we’re just going dancing,” she winked as she held me against the wall.

“Dancing... what the hell...” I growled. “You’ve always loved the shower.”

All I wanted to do now was fuck her, and her body was making it very clear she wanted the same. Instead, she quickly rinsed herself off and stepped out of the shower to dry off. She gestured toward a bundle of clothes that I’d left at her house long ago. “These might be a bit out of fashion, but I’m guessing they’ll still fit. You might be out of shape, but you haven’t gained weight, Kevin dear.”

“You are a real bitch, Jana. You know that? Turn me on and then leave me here?”

She winked as she faced me, placing her hands on her hips, her huge boobs standing so proud on her powerful chest. “I just wanted to make sure all the good parts of you are awake. One of your students said you’d been locked in your lab for weeks.”

I stood there, totally aroused and drooling now. She was a very handsome woman. Maybe a bit too much muscle for my taste, but damn she knew how to use them. She had many times the strength of even the most athletic Tazzian.

“God, you’re killing me, Jana.”

“Nobody is going to die. We’re just going dancing, Kevin.”

She started to get dressed in the old clothes she’d given me, my brain fuzzy as too much blood was rushing low on my body. I was so engorged that closing the zipper of my pants was impossible. She ignored my ignoble state, and grabbed my wrist to drag me out

the door and down the hallway toward the flitter park. An air taxi was waiting, and she pushed me into the wide back seat. I glared up at her as she climbed in behind me.

“I don’t know what you’re up to here, Jana, but you don’t know how to dance. Hell, you don’t have a flexible joint in your body.”

“Never said you were going to dance with me.”

God I wanted her. “You remember how we used to make a sexy game out of having sex in flitters? I’m surprised we never got arrested. How about one more time?”

She hesitated as if she was weighing my words, I could see the smoldering passion in her bright eyes, and the firm press of hard nipples beneath her blouse. She bit her lip and shook her head slowly. “As much as I’m tempted, Kevin dear, I have a big surprise for you waiting at the club. Someone who asked about you earlier.”

Shit. So that’s what this was about. “Let me guess. A newly divorced friend of yours?” The last thing I wanted right now was some delicate flower.

“Nope. Never met her before yesterday. And she’s never been married, not exactly anyway. I bet she’s the best dancer on the planet. And you still love to dance, right?”

“Best dancer...?” I hooted. “She said that? Sounds full of herself. I used to dance with the best. What’s her name?”

Jana ignored my question as she glanced out the window. “Look. We’re almost there.”

Before I lean over to follow her gaze, the flitter started to drop like a rock, sending my stomach rising to my mouth. It flattened out so abruptly that I was crushed deep into my seat. Then it free fell again, my stomach in my throat before it finally braked to thump onto the roadway directly in front of the Gymkhana. Laser-light patterns of every describable color were tracing intricate shapes in the slightly foggy air, and loud music was booming from inside.

Jana dragged me out of the flitter and toward the front door of the Gymkhana. The oversized bouncers closed ranks in front of her, only to jump aside at the last moment —

no Tazzian in his right mind was going to try and stop a Zetan.

Inside, the music and light show filled the air around me, giving the huge dance floor the usual surreal look. It had been a long time since I'd been here, but the pounding music was as familiar as yesterday. Before I knew it, Jana had me out on the huge, transparent dance floor. The music and lights and the crowd of dancers worked wonders on my brain. Reflexes were triggered. That damnable GAR didn't matter so much anymore as I swept the tall Amazon into my arms, my eyes barely above her amazing boobs. To hell with her husband and vows. Marriage wasn't supposed to be a sexual prison, and dancing was the most elaborate form of foreplay ever invented by man.

She awkwardly followed my lead for a dozen steps before forcibly spinning me around to point toward the far side of the dance floor. "There she is, Kevin. The woman who wanted to meet you."

The crowd parted to reveal an exquisitely beautiful blonde dancing at the far edge of the stage. She was slender and tall, but she moved with the grace and power of a premier athlete. My first impression of her age was that she was scholassie in her final year of college, but I'd never seen her on campus. I wouldn't have missed those long, shapely legs, lean and muscular yet sculpted as if by a master artist. I wondered if I was hallucinating, given the way Jana had dragged me out of my hole. Nobody could look that good.

She wore an ultra-expensive BioPlas outfit whose shape and color changed as she moved. She was hardly a starving student. That dress probably cost more than I make in a year.

She had long, shimmering sunshine blonde hair that framed a wide, beautiful face, with high cheekbones and hollow cheeks. And then there were those big, blue eyes, the color of a high mountain sky.

I was smitten. "Who the hell... who is that...?" I gasped. "Mother of God, she's gorgeous."

"A goddess. Well, more or less."

I had no idea what she was talking about. Goddess? I couldn't help but stare at her. I was fascinated by the way she moved, pirouetting on one extended toe to weightlessly jump into the air to spin around with astounding flexibility and power. I'd seem some outstanding dancers, but never anyone that light on their feet.

"Lordy..." I gasped, struggling to get my head together. I tried to look away. This kind of infatuation never ended well, and looked for excuses to dismiss her. "Kind of young, don't you think?"

Jana shook her head. "She's older than she looks."

It took all my willpower to turn back toward Jana. "Well, she's too beautiful, too blonde and too young. The three deadly Toos. Four if you toss in her too good dancing and fitness. Too damn good to be true. I'm heading for the bar."

Jana grabbed my arm tightly enough to hurt, forcing me to turn back around to stare again. The blonde seemed to radiate her beauty the way the sun gave off warmth. Like there was an aura of amazingness around her, for lack of a word. She was dancing with the kind of athleticism and skill that came from thousands and thousands of hours of training and specialty exercise, but she wasn't even breathing hard.

I shook my head again. I'd learned long ago that prima dancers were invariably so hung up on themselves that they destroyed everything and everyone around them. She could break any heart, and she knew it. Likely it was a game to her.

Still I couldn't pull my eyes away. Her azure blue outfit was shimmering with waves of amber, silver and blue, changing with her movements. BioPlas dresses were actually non-volitional living creatures that linked telepathically with their wearers. They could change their color, shape and texture from silvery combat armor to a sheer negligee in the blink of an eye, not to mention everything in between. She spun around like a figure skater, her long hair flying outward before falling to envelop her upper body in a golden glow. I was marveling at how she managed to stay on her feet when something amazing happened: she leaped gently upward to float over the heads of the other dancers — and then hung there to begin the most exotic of dances — an aerofluge. The air dance. Spinning around while slowly somersaulting in mid-air, she elegantly blended classical

grace with aerobatics. It would have taken her hundreds of hours on a very expensive anti-grav dance floor to learn those moves.

And then it hit me: the Gymkhana didn't have an anti-grav dance floor.

"What the hell..." I gasped as it hit me like a hammer.

"Told you," Jana smirked as she saw my wide-open eyes. "Goddess."

There was only one woman on Tazzi's World who could air dance without an anti-grav, and she was most definitely a blue-eyed blonde. She had to be the Velorian Companion who was bound to Salomon Gazrall, the richest and most powerful man on the planet.

"You're kidding me? That's the Velorian?"

Jana nodded. "Told you. A real, live honest-to-goodness gold-plated genuine goddess."

"And she's the person who's been asking for me?"

"Yeah... which is even more amazing," Jana responded. "Hard to believe that Gazrall's Companion has to go slumming to get laid."

I wasn't sure if I should be flattered or insulted. As a full Professor, I was hardly slum material.

There had been endless rumors circulating about the Velorian when she first arrived here two decades ago, but Gazrall had insisted that nothing be written about her. Early on, she'd looked so formal in public appearances, so aloof, in both dress and manner. But then she disappeared, and no images or news of any kind had been published since. Other than official pictures from orchestrated appearances in support of Gazrall's empire. He controlled virtually all the media outlets and had intimidated the rest, he'd been able to get his way.

Eventually, the wild speculation and rumors faded for lack of feeding. Nobody had seen or heard anything for at least five years now. The smart money was backing a rumor that she'd broken her contract and fled the planet. Gazrall was not only ugly and ancient,

but he was a crude, unpleasant and arrogant man. Most people referred to him as The Scrooge.

But this couldn't be that girl. She'd come here as a fresh-faced seventeen year old — nearly two decades ago. She had to be pushing forty, but she looked like she was in her early twenties. Her skin was flawlessly tanned and her perfect figure and extreme fitness were off the charts.

"They don't age," Jana sighed next to me. "Supposedly, they just get more beautiful with passing time. For centuries and centuries."

Jana would know if anyone did. She'd studied the Homo Sapiens Supremis race when she was at the university. Variations of that artificially-enhanced race included Aureans, Velorians and Geheimites.

"A dream beyond reason," she sighed again, clearly jealous. "To live almost forever. To always be beautiful and healthy."

"Yeah, but she's bonded to a man that looks like her great-great-grandfather," I said.

Jana shrugged as she shouted over the rising volume of music. "Hey, who cares? He paid for her. Story has it more than fifty million credits — the annual salary of about twenty-thousand ordinary Tazzians. Supposedly her term of indenture is for generations. Companions are exotic bedmates that get handed down from their original patrons to their offspring." She paused to frown back at the golden, glowing Velorian. "Which is kind of sick when you think about it. Despite all those advanced trans-genetics, she's nothing but a fancy sex slave."

"I've heard stories about them," I countered. "How they act as bodyguards too."

"All I know, Kevin dear, is that her indentured contract wouldn't be legal here on Tazzi if not for Gazrall's influence over the Judiciary."

"Their indentures are voluntary," I pointed out, recalling what I'd read about Companions. "Hell, Gazrall is too old for sex anyway."

“As if he couldn’t afford treatments for that,” Jana said, shaking her head. “Even weirder, Velorians are the most physically powerful beings in the universe, with the possible exception of the Geheimites, of which we know little if anything; and the Galen, who are more like ghosts or gods, depending on your perspective.”

This young woman didn’t just scream power. Instead, she was poetry in motion, moving about with the fluidness of a tigress. Her extreme beauty and overpowering sensuality was electrifying. If she was also thousands of times stronger than any human, and essentially indestructible as the rumors claimed, then she was the perfect bodyguard for a fabulously rich man with over-reaching political ambitions like Gazrall.

He’d made his first billions by carefully investing the millions he’d inherited from his wealthy father. His father had traveled extensively on Scalantran ships, and had bought into a lot of planet-based enterprises along the trading routes. His father wasn’t a Riggy, the Tazzian term for someone who was the descendent of the original humans who had been abducted from Earth and dropped here so long ago. Nobody exactly knew where he’d come from. But his father’s son had become a tyrant who ruled everything from behind the scenes. Gazrall didn’t have friends but he had innumerable enemies, so having a Companion who warmed his bed was the perfect way to stay alive — if she wasn’t wrapped around him, she’d always be within arms reach. I’d heard rumors about foiled assassination attempts, but those kinds of stories never saw the light of day on the Gazrall-controlled news-net. The perpetrators were never identified or seen again. But, of course, no one speculated about that in public. Gazrall’s spies were everywhere.

It was with that thought that Jana’s earlier statement fully sank in, bringing with it a growing sliver of fear. If Gazrall’s Companion was looking for me, then that meant the old man wanted something from me, and that was exceedingly dangerous. He must have heard about the GAR.

“I’ve read so much outrageous speculation about her,” Jana spoke again, breaking my train of thought, “but she’s way, way, way cuter in person.”

The look on her face said she was as smitten as me. Jana had always swung both ways.

“She’s not even human, Jana,” I offered, trying to calm my own excitement as well as hers. “Engineered as opposed to born. Probably part machine. Nobody knows for sure what makes them tick. She’s one of the perks of Gazrall being richer than God. A beautiful woman with infinite sexual needs and superhuman skills who is slavishly loyal. By legal agreement for longer than we’ll ever live.”

Jana giggled. “Yeah. Every man’s dream girl. Always eager and too beautiful to be merely human.”

“And maybe a few women’s too?” I ventured.

She hugged my arm as she pulled me close, her tightly-muscled body so warm against mine. We’d been very good together once upon a time, the two of us competing to see who could bring the hottest women into our shared bed. I caught myself wondering if she was about to pull a trump card on me and invite the Velorian.

“The ultimate sexual being,” Jana continued, “and they’re all born gloriously bisexual.”

“All of them?” I laughed. “What kind of racy stories have you been reading?”

“I did my research after she approached me this morning. I still have access to the Central Archives through Kirk’s proxy. What I learned was that a Companion must serve her contract-holder in any way he wants, as long as it doesn’t injure him and is necessary to protect his physical well-being. Absolutely any way.”

“Is everything really about sex and power with you?”

She turned to wink at me. “Incredible sex is a kind of power. Like it used to be with us.”

“Hah. You had tonight’s chance back in the shower, Jana.”

She looked longingly at me for a moment, and just when I thought she was going to try and convince me otherwise, she shrugged it away. “Whatever you say. My job is done anyway, Kevin boy. Go. Dance with her.”

I didn’t need any encouragement for that — this dance floor used to be my first

home, and I was growing more enthralled by the moment while watching the Velorian's air-dancing. I'd once tried dancing in an anti-grav club, back in my student days, but that kind of flight time was too expensive for me to indulge in. Yet watching the Velorian now, floating up there using nothing but her natural-born power of flight, I couldn't help but share the age-old dream of unfettered flight. I knew a little about how it felt, based on my brief anti-grav time, but even more from the very vivid dreams I'd been having for years. Dreams where I could always fly.

Jana wasn't done with me yet. She leaned against my back while whispering in my ear. "What I can't understand, Kevin, is why such an astoundingly beautiful young woman would submit to such humiliation. She could choose any man, or woman, and with her power, she could live on any planet, in paradise itself, not on some corrupt world like Tazzi. She could inspire and protect the weak, but instead she uses her power to prop up the wicked and strong."

Jana had never made a secret of her contempt for the powers-that-be — she was a true anarchist at heart. Yet I heard only envy in her voice now.

"But most of all she can fly," I added with a sigh. "Even between the stars. What a dream that would be."

"I was thinking of more earthly pleasures," Jana smirked. "But yes, that too."

That got me wondering. I turned to look at her. "So when she asked about me this morning, exactly what did she say?"

Jana just gave me a wink and shook her head as she backed away to slip into the crowd, raising her finger to her lips. My first instinct was to go after her and demand that she tell me, but then the Velorian floated closer overhead. I felt myself drawn irresistibly toward her, like steel to a magnet, the sensation overpowering, even more for a strange feeling of familiarity that washed over me. Kind of like *deja-vu*. Her floral perfume washed over me, wildflowers and honey, and an electrically-charged rush of desire and unquenchable energy raced through my body, invigorating me. It seemed as if the very air around the Velorian was charged with invisible energy, and somehow my body was soaking it up.

Watching her closely as she rose again to air-dance, I was astounded to see that her movements exactly matched my seemingly impossible dreams of flight. My jaw fell as the spectacle of pulsing lights reflected from her golden hair, her ultra-short dress teasing me with what it barely concealed. Yet all the while, star-struck as I was, that strong sense of déjà-vu kept teasing me, sending tingles down my back, drawing me to her. Had I already lived this moment in some other place or time?

I struggled to sort out my racing thoughts and confused emotions when the music suddenly died, and then started again, this time slower, softer, almost ethereal in its simplicity and beauty. My heart leaped as the Velorian floated down to land light as a feather — directly in front of me. Her dazzlingly blue eyes stared levelly into mine as she smiled so brightly that I swore the sun had just come out from behind a cloud. She reached out to take my hands in hers, her skin warm and astoundingly soft.

“Would you like to dance?”

My jaw dropped as I stared at her, my brain so overloaded with sensations and misplaced dreams that I was frozen in place.

She waved her hand in front of my face and spoke a little louder. “Hello? I was wondering if you wanted to dance?”

Her voice was soft and melodious, yet as clear as the song of a meadowlark. I’d never heard such a beautiful voice. I fell into a dream, barely able to nod.

“Of... course... yes...” I replied, feeling strangely unsure of myself. I’d been a dancing fool for years, but now I just felt like a fool. This goddess truly wanted to dance with me?

She smiled warmly as she floated weightlessly into my arms; enveloping me with that amazing perfume. Inhaling it, I had a vision of spring wildflowers blooming and sun-warmed honey. An overwhelming sense of well-being washed over me, followed by a rush of strength and extreme healthiness. I had never been this overwhelmed by a woman, nor had I felt so intimidated, and I’d cavorted with the top dancers back in my day. My face prickled pink as I blushed like I had when dancing with a pretty girl when I

was a teenager. I felt so wondrously alive and young, my senses suddenly in tune with the siren-call of the universe. Anything was possible with a woman like this.

All traces of doubt evaporated, and I led her confidently into the first step of the dance, my well-practiced instincts flooding back. Wrapping my arm around her small, firm waist, I began the opening moves of the romantic Capreaceous, the most complicated dance I knew. People studied for years to master the Capreaceous, I certainly had, but it was instantly clear that she knew the Capreaceous as well as I did. She was light as a feather in my arms, resting her head on my shoulder as the dance required, her soft golden hair falling over me to look like spun gold in the sunshine. Yet despite her delicate touch and lightness of foot, her body was frighteningly firm when I held her close. Her soft skin had only a little give before hinting at steely power coiled just below the surface, yet she was lighter on her feet than any dancer I'd ever known.

That first song faded far too soon, and was followed by a more vigorous number, signaling the start of the Morango — an extremely athletic dance. We began swirling across the dance floor while the rest of the clubgoers moved to the fringes to give us space. Whether it was her inspiration or just the release of my long building frustrations, I soon found myself dancing with more energy and skill than ever before. Her body was so light that I could toss her high into the air, spinning around several times before I caught her, the two of us moving fast and gracefully, her long, glowing hair flying wildly to the sides. So imagine my shocked surprise when she reversed the roles and threw all 220 pounds of me high into the air, almost to the ceiling. She caught me halfway down to continue our dance on thin air. I tried to follow her lead now, but it was completely disorienting being led by a woman of such skill, let alone with nothing but air under my toes. She brushed herself enticingly up and down my ardor, proving she understood the true intent of the Morango, a dance that offered no apology for being little more than an elaborate form of public foreplay.

“You are quite the dancer,” she whispered as we swept into the final moves, our feet high above the floor as my blood rushed lower, leaving my head spinning.

I tried to return the compliment, only to have her wrap her legs around me so tightly the air exploded from my lungs. She flipped me over her back and then caught me before

I hit the floor. Stunned and no longer able to anticipate her next move, I just held onto her as she somersaulted the two of us across the room, and then released me just as my feet brushed the dance floor. I slid smoothly across the wood, barely managing the presence of mind and quickness to catch her as she fell limply into my arms, surrendering to me as the dance required. I hugged her as tightly as I could as we shared the obligatory final kiss. A kiss that must be held until the audience finishes applauding.

Her lips were fragrant with her perfume as they melted sexily into mine, her tongue deepening the kiss. That wasn't part of the dance requirement, but her long, blonde hair covered both of us with a golden glow. Inside that fragrant cloud, we were in our own world, exploring each other as our kisses deepened further yet. The applause lasted a very long time, so much so that the band stood up and applauded as well, delaying the start of the next number.

I prayed the applause would go on forever.

But like all good things, it finally faded. Yet instead of separating as required by the rules of dance, she continued to cling to me, molding her body to mine to conceal my out-of-control arousal. She rested her head lightly on my shoulder as she looked up at me, her blue eyes so large, so luminous.

“My name's Vespyr, by the way.”

“And you obviously know mine,” I gasped, barely able to breathe. “Given you called for me to come tonight.”

She lifted her head to lean back slightly and smile at me, her eyes sparkling with amusement as she softly traced her fingers over my ardor. “Your reputation for dramatic dance precedes you, Professor Galton, not to mention your other outstanding talents. I'm sorry I had to resort to subterfuge to meet you. Thank Jana for me the next time you see her.”

I began to worry again about her reasons for meeting me — she was Gazrall's woman after all — but I held my questions. I never wanted her to leave my arms. She seemed to understand, and waved her hand in the direction of the band. The beat of the

music resumed with the opening chords of a playful and athletic Foxla. She jumped up to lock her legs around my waist, and I spun her around and around as she stretched herself out horizontally, holding on with her legs. I thrilled to both her child-like weightlessness and the way her very long hair flew so golden and free. Thankfully, she was allowing me to lead again.

“I hope this doesn’t, you know, sound funny, Vespyr, but you dance just like an angel.”

“That’s because I am,” she winked as her silky hair playfully lashing the backs of the dancers nearest to us. One of the goals of the Foxla is to spin your partners so their hair mingles with the next dancer’s hair, but without cracking skulls. Long hair was obviously an advantage, and Vespyr had the longest hair of anyone in the room. The music shifted, and she rose to face me, wrapping her arms around my neck as she slid down her body until her lips brushed mine, her feet touching the floor as required. Her dress was shimmering with a rainbow of vibrant colors now.

“That’s a beautiful dress,” I offered. “I’ve heard that BioPlas is actually alive. That it feeds on the wearer’s emotions?”

“Ah... so you are a man who appreciates fine fashion,” she laughed. “However, I have it on good authority that you much prefer your partners to be without clothing.”

So, she knew about my brief flirtation with nude dancing, a subspecialty I’d excelled at. “A naked angel?” I mocked her. “They’d repossess your halo.”

She laughed, her voice tinkling and high yet somehow rich at the same time. I’d never heard such a beautiful sound. “Somehow I don’t think they make halos for Velorians. Or for devils like you. You are some kind of dervish based on the way you dance.”

“I’ve been called far worse.”

“But you are a devil. The way your body is so... right. I feel wicked and unrepentant when I’m in your arms. Perhaps the usual rules don’t apply to beings such as we.”

The promise of her words made me smile, reminding me of all the other intimate

invitations I'd received while dancing this way. No one knew, but many women had sensed my secret legacy. I stood apart from other men in one critical way, which was sometimes very good when I was with the right woman. My bed partners had always been dancers back then, other than Jana of course. They had been very good years. But Vespvr was hardly my partner, let alone some infatuated scholassie. She was Gazrall's woman, an alien goddess, the sworn and contracted possession of the richest, most powerful man on the planet. Also the sworn enemy of anyone with Aurean blood.

I found myself sliding into very dangerous territory.

Those worries had just started to grow when the music changed again. I focused on my dancing as I slipped behind her to hold her tightly to myself, pressing my ardor against her tight ass, her body moving against mine with an animal athleticism. She reminded me of a tawny cat as she arched herself backward, my hands closing around her tight waist, the golden glow of her hair enveloping both of us again as she slipped lower, encouraging my hands to rise as she leaned her head back onto my shoulder. Unbidden, my hands closed around the fullness of her breasts, which rode impossibly high and firm on her strong chest, like they'd been made for my unusually large hands. Somehow she was both impossibly firm while aching soft.

She responded by sliding intimately up and down my hardness, the curve of her body fitting so perfectly against mine as she pushed against me, pushing down on me to guide me between the luscious folds of her marvelous cheeks, then holding me so very tightly. It wasn't unusual for a guy to lose it completely during this part of the Foxla, although that would get you disqualified during a contest. The Foxla dance wasn't technically public sex, but it was supposed to be the closest thing possible.

I struggled harder than I ever had before to keep control, so much so that my face was red and my body was shaking by the time the music thankfully faded and the wonderful agony of the Foxla came to an end. Vespvr slipped from my arms to face me, her body close enough to hide my now profound erection. I needed to sit down, to cool off, to get my feelings under control, but the pounding beat of an even faster number started. I reached for her, but instead of taking me flying as I so fervently wished, she threw me a kiss and floated off to dance with someone else. Moments later, I saw her

lifting some other lucky guy off the floor to swirl high overhead.

Two lovely scholassies came to my rescue, one of whom started whispering erotic promises in my ear as her hand traveled low to wrap intimately around me — all pretense of dancing was now forgotten. Scholassies or not, I'd go anywhere with them. We were heading for the door when Jana arrived to keep me out of trouble. Fraternizing between Professors and scholassies was strictly forbidden, not that I cared a damn right now.

“She's the mistress of a power hungry billionaire, Kevin. Supposedly unfuckable by ordinary mortals, what with all that muscle tone. A rich man's ultimate trophy, and a dozen light-years out of your league. I rather doubt in any case that Gazrall is the sharing type. Better for you to focus on present company.”

The young scholassies giggled as they wrapped themselves around me even tighter, making promises with their bodies that I'd normally be more than happy to cash in. There was a time when I'd routinely entertained several women in my bed at the same time, thanks to my unusual endurance. Jana had loved that, and given she was bi, she enjoyed the infatuated girls as much as I had. I remembered the freedom of the dark, soft grass behind the dance hall, lying in a grove of fragrant trees. I'd made love to many a dancer in that grove back in the day. Three lovers was just about right, given how I felt now.

We were almost to the door when Vespyr magically descended to land in front of us, her body radiating light like a newly born star. The scholassies paused, Jana too, as they saw how terribly outclassed they were in every way.

“My lady of light, floating so free,” I gushed, my body so alive, every fiber of my being calling out to her. “My lovely Companion from the golden planet. Who is your master to be tonight?”

“You will,” she whispered in my ear, her delicate perfume filling my senses. Then louder: “If your friends will excuse you, of course.”

I started to open my mouth to seal the deal, but Vespyr's kisses found my lips first. I eagerly returned her kiss as everyone else in the room faded away. Lost in each other's

arms, we stood as if alone. I could have made love to her right there without embarrassment, right in the middle of the crowd, but Vespyr slipped from my grasp, a questioning look filling her bright eyes as she tilted her head slightly. “But do you think you can handle a truly wild mare? A tigress. Maybe even... a super girl.”

I growled at her. “You are looking at a super man, girl.”

She laughed. I adored the way she laughed; like an innocent girl. She floated off the floor to circle me before wrapping her arms around me from the back. She used her height to lean over my shoulder and bite my earlobe -- hard enough to draw blood! The shock of her unexpectedly painful bite turned my desire into liquid fire. I tried to turn and return the favor, but she pulled herself free of me, a confused look on her face. She seemed to be tasting my blood on her tongue. She closed her eyes for a long moment, and then opened them really wide.

“Well, what do you know! A family secret perhaps?”

My heart froze.

She walked forward, taking me back in her arms as she touched her lips to my ear and whispered: “As in... the dark empire kind of secret?”

A cold dagger of fear stabbed through me. She knew enough now to get me fired from the university and probably deported from the planet!

I stared back at her, eyes wide, confused and off-balance, and suddenly more than a little afraid. Velorians were rumored to have no love for their dark cousins, and a single punch from her would probably reduce me to so much pink mist. Instead, she smiled and wrapped her arms around me to kiss me again, the coppery taste of my blood blending with her wondrous scent. She held me tighter than any woman had before, my body seemingly drawing erotic power from her, so much so that I began to vibrate. I'd never felt this strong, this vital. This much a man.

“Perhaps we should release the superman who hides inside you,” she whispered.

Chapter Four

I was speechless. She not only knew my secret, but she seemed excited about it. She grabbed my hand and began dragging me toward the door, the scholassies trailing us, still eager. Vespyr kicked off her heels and lifted me over the crowd, wind rushing in my ears as she crashed through the entrance doors, sending the bouncers flying. We soared up into the night, above the hovering flitters stacked high in the night air, to approach a fancy limo that was poised at the top of the stack, more than a thousand feet from the ground. Its door opened as we approached and Vespyr shoved me inside and began kissing me as she tore at my clothing.

Shocked and excited and very turned on, but also overwhelmed, the blue of her bedroom eyes ignited a primal surge of desire inside me. I abandoned all restraint, and reaching out to try and remove her dress. The living fabric retreated from my touch to reveal luxuriously tanned skin, silky and warm and completely flawless. Her back seemed to be made of infinitely flexible steel, supple yet unimaginably strong. Her living skirt shrank into a narrow band around her waist as she guided my hands to her breasts. I marveled at their resilient firmness, riding so high and firm on her chest, filling even my large hands, nipples hard as steel. Lost in exploring the wonders of her body, I barely noticed as she snapped a thin, golden choker around her neck, but I immediately felt the difference as her body softened in my hands, that living steel turning into the firm flesh. She sighed loudly, almost a groan, as she slumping downward to straddle me, wrapping her long legs around my hips as she pressed herself tightly against my ardor.

Something dramatic had just changed inside her, but this wasn't the time to be analytical. She clearly wanted me, and, oh God, did I want her.

I grabbed her ass and pulled her closer, my fingers digging into the yielding yet firm flesh of a superbly toned woman. She was tall enough to pull my face between her warm breasts, brushing her shoulders from side to side to trace her ripe nipples across my three-day old stubble, which seemed to excite her further. I grabbed one of her nipples with my lips, trapping it, then clenched it gently with my teeth. She gave off a little squeak of pleasure, so I bit harder, then harder yet, and he cried out louder, urging me on as she

leaned down to whisper in my ear.

“You don’t ever have to be gentle with me, Professor. Be my man of steel.”

A slice of pure fire pierced my soul as her words registered true. Words I’d long imagined an unhurttable Aurean femme might utter to her lover. Yet Vespyr was Velorian, an enemy to anyone born on Aurea. Far from being afraid of her, an unbounded surge of strength seemed to explode inside me, raw and unrestrained, pushing away all fears as it filled me with unbounded confidence. I clamped down on her nipple with all of my misbegotten strength, and she cried out as she leaned into me, burying my face deeply in her soft breast. She returned the favor, her fingers closing around my manhood to hold me painfully tightly. That wondrous pain propelled my passion further, harder, bigger. Grabbing her ass with all my strength, I kneaded her firm flesh as I worked a finger in between her cheeks, tracing toward the front to find the warmth and wetness beneath her pubic bone. She yielded to my finger as she gripped my erection with even greater strength.

“Oh, Skietra,” she cried as she held me with both hands. “Truly, you *are* a superman.”

Her body was trembled as wildly as mine as she rose to straddle me, her back pressed against the low ceiling of the flitter as she worked to guide the length of me into her wetness. I shifted my hands back to her ass and tried to take her, only to find that she was incredibly tight, seemingly virginal.

How could that be? She was a Companion.

She tried to help me, lowering her full weight over me, and I thrust myself upward again, this time with every ounce of strength I had, lifting her upward to slam her head against the roof of the flitter. She cried out in pleasure as she pressed her hands against the ceiling to increase her weight, pushing down on me, and her body finally opened for me, enveloping me with slippery warmth as I took her deeply. Her inner muscles held me so tightly I could barely move, waves of contractions kneading me in a way I’d never felt before. Somehow I seemed to suck power from her, my half Aurean muscles responding, bulging, tendons standing out like steel cables as my body turned into its own kind of

steel.

Vespyr vibrated like the instrument of passion she was, rocking back and forth as she held me so deep, moving up and down on me now as I clung to her shoulders, her slow rhythm driving me crazy. She began to speed up, and I used my burgeoning strength to thrust ever more powerfully into her, each time eliciting a squeak of pleasure from her. The folds that enveloped me began rippling with powerful waves, her vaginal strength at moments so great that it was hard to keep going. It was as if her body was testing me, determining if I was worthy of her.

That contest of intimate strength triggered something that I knew lived deeply inside me, as it does with every Aurean male. A power I'd never dared release, not even with Jana. My already great strength soared as my fervor abandoned all boundaries, taking her harder than any human woman could endure.

"Oh, Skietra... Yes!... harder... way harder! Yes!" she cried, digging her heels into my ass to augment my strength.

Wild abandon coursed like fire through my veins as I fell into a berserker's passion. I'd never felt remotely this strong or vital, never this virile! I was so lost in the surge of superhuman fucking that I was only dimly aware that I was smashing her head against the roof of the flitter, or that the flitter was now gyrating around in the sky as the driver tried to keep control.

Her body somehow seemed to merge with mine as we cried out together, her body stiffening again and again as she came, each time holding me so tightly that I couldn't move or even breathe for a moment, my lungs emptying from her passionate embrace, my very bones creaking as she shook wildly with each orgasm. They came like a machine gun, again and again, endlessly. She spun me to lay on her back on the seat, arching her back and lifting her hips as her long legs wrapped around me, her mouth opening into a perfect O each time she came. Yet mere seconds of reflection separated those bursts of fireworks, her quick, violent and continuous orgasm telling me everything I needed to know about the paucity of her sexual relations with Gazrall.

I felt as if I'd been born for this moment, my every fiber focused on keeping her

going as long as I could. Strangely, I was in do danger of losing my own control. I was steel, I was the ultimate man, I felt strangely in control of this Velorian in ways I'd never been in control of any woman before, on the dance floor or in my bed.

I didn't notice until too late that our berserk fucking was shaking the flitter so badly that the poor flitterman couldn't keep it pointing in the proper direction or even on the level. I was smashing Vespyr's head against the door as I thrust into her with my toes against the opposite door, releasing every ounce of my strength into her. My thrusts grew stronger and stronger until I finally slammed her head so hard against the door that the latch failed, sending the door flinging open At that same moment, the flitter lean that way, and we began sliding head first out the door. The slipstream pulled us the rest of the way out, falling into the night until we came to a stop, dangling beneath the flitter, gyrating wildly. Vesper had spread her legs to grip the open doorway with her toes, her golden hair whipping around us to obscure the lights far below.

"Don't stop! Oh, Skietra, please don't!" she cried.

I began flailing frantically as she was now the one humping me, struggling to reach behind myself far enough to catch the edge of the door frame. She was going so crazy on me that I couldn't reach it. I tried to push her away, hoping to climb back up her long legs, but she was holding me so tightly inside that I couldn't move, her body vibrating around me like some kind of machine. A dizzying wave of acrophobia washed over me as I stared down at the lights and tiny flitters and the dots of people on the streets so far below. Was this how I was to die, falling from the sky during lovemaking?

This was no longer like my flying dreams, especially as I noticed that the lights were coming closer every second. The flitter was falling as the driver struggled to hang onto us. I heard the flitter's anti-grav turbine starting to spin down as it overloaded. Glancing up, I caught a glimpse of the driver staring down at us in his side view mirror, his face a mask of terror as he wrestled with the controls. He made things worse by stabbing frantically at the Emergency Start button, and after the third punch, the anti-grav gave off the kind of ominous hum that said it was going into restart mode. The flitter stopped flying completely now and began to free-fall.

Vespyr was our only hope now, yet she so lost in her passion that she had no idea what was happening. I reached down to deliver a slap to her face that would have broken a lesser woman's neck, but she seemed not to notice as another hot burst of fireworks took her, her body shaking so powerfully that she would have thrown me off her if not for her inner grip. I hit her again, harder yet, then again, as hard as I could this time, and finally she opened her eyes to glare at me.

"Wha...?"

The flitter was spinning around crazily as the street rushing up at us, the anti-grav deep in reset mode now. Only seconds to go. Vespyr looked behind her and her eyes opened wide.

"Get it off me!" she screamed, clawing at her gold choker.

Of course! I remembered how she'd softened when she put it on, recalling as I did some story I'd heard about Velorians not being able to fly while wearing gold. Until this moment, I'd had no idea what that was all about.

I grabbed for her choker, trying to find the catch behind her neck, but I couldn't feel it. I slipped my fingers under the band and jerked hard enough to have beheaded a lesser woman, but it still didn't break. That's when I saw the hair-like strand of purplish metal that ran through the center of the choker. Vendorian steel!

I twisted my body desperately to the side as I lunged upward toward the flitter. Vespyr's legs were so long that my fingertips barely caught the edge of the door. Terrified, I gripped the flitter with superhuman strength to tear a long shard of steel trim from the doorframe. Twisting back around, I jammed my ad-hoc pry bar under her choker as I desperately twisted it with all my strength. The sharp steel tore into the soft gold, but hung up on the Vendorian steel thread. The ground was coming up fast as I twisted my arms outward, steel muscles bulging as I dug the shard deeply into her neck, and that tiny purple thread gave off a loud POP as it broke.

A blaze of blue light exploded from Vespyr's eyes as she clamped down on me with the vice-like grip of spring steel, her inner strength sending an agonizing surge of

blood back into my body and up toward my brain.

The last thing I saw was the pavement rushing up.

Chapter Five

I woke to find myself lying beneath a pile of bent metal and shattered glass. Vespyr was on top of me, resting on her bent arms and knees, with the flitter resting on her back. I gasped for air as if the wind had been knocked out of me, but I still managed to grab her shoulders to help her bear the weight of the flitter. Her warm steel of her body had no give now. I was shocked to find I was still inside her. I tried to withdraw, but could not. Movement caught my eye, and I turned to see the flitterman crawling from the wreckage, holding what appeared to be his broken arm with the other. He stared down to see us still locked together, and shook his head disdainfully. Then his eyes caught the glitter of Vespyr's dropped choker. Anyone could see that it was worth a king's ransom. The shimmering gold with the broken thread of purple through it. That super-steel, Vendorian in origin, might as well be Unobtainium as far as most of the universe was concerned.

Vespyr rose slightly, lifting me along with the five tons of wreckage on her back. She extended her right hand toward the flitterman. "Bring me my choker," she called out. "Quickly."

The driver stared dumbly at her, clearly wondering why we weren't crushed to jelly. Then his hungry eyes dropped back to the heavy gold choker and its invaluable thread. He grabbed it up and started running away as fast as his broken arm allowed.

Vespyr's eyes were only inches from mine when they flashed as brightly as a blue arc welder. The actinic glare briefly blinded, but not for so long that I didn't see the light pole fall, its base cut neatly in half by her eyes. I fell directly in front of the flitter man.

He stopped and turned back to stare back at us, terror in his eyes now.

"The next burst is for you," Vespyr called to him. "Now bring me the fucking choker!"

The flitterman turned away again, and Vespyr's eyes flashed again, charring my

cheek as a fire hydrant behind the man suddenly exploded. The edge of one beam touched the flitterman's leg to set his pants on fire. He spun around to fall into the cooling blast of water from the melted hydrant, and then threw the choker our way. I had more doubt than he did that her next blast was going to vaporize him.

Vespyr put one hand behind the small of my back to hold me tightly to her chest as she floated upward, the flitter creaking and groaning as broken parts fell around us. Her breasts grew warm against my chest as she gave the flitter a toss, sending it skidding across the roadway to crash into a road barrier. She held me to her as she floated over to hover just above the choker. Snagging it with her toe, she flicked it expertly up into her hand. I took it from her with shaking hands, and struggled to snap it around her neck. I couldn't work the latch — it had made for stronger fingers than mine.

"Just hold onto me," she said, her voice stronger and richer with harmonics than before.

I cupped her buttocks as I held her high enough on my body to take the pressure off my erection. I felt her reach up to work the clasp, finally snapping it around her neck. Like magic, her body softened again, and she collapsed in my arms. I was the strong one now, and I used that strength to grip her buttocks and lift her high to withdraw. Lowering her to the ground, I was shocked when Vespyr knelt in front of me, softly kissing my wounded organ, her hair warm with her natural perfume. I took one deep breath of her scent, and was instantly a man again, that surge of impossible strength coursing through me.

"Are you all right?" she asked urgently, her lips closing around me.

I nodded, smiling broadly as she took me deeply, my body soaring with desire. I shouldn't be alive. Hell, I was lucky to even have a cock now, even more to have a Velorian healing me this way.

She leaned her head back, releasing me as she smiled up at me. "You... You should have been killed when I went super while you were inside me," she said, a bit muffled. "Thank Skietra for Aurean steel."

I nodded vigorously, my eyes rolling up in my head as she took me deep again, and magically, all my aches and pains had vanished. "I... I thought you Velorians and, uh, we Aureans are mortal enemies?" I gasped.

She leaned back, releasing me again. "Yeah. And you deserve death after such awful sex."

I laughed, remembering so well her machine gun orgasms. "Awful, my ass!"

She rose to face me, standing so close that her hard nipples pressed against my chest, my erection bending firmly against her stomach. "So why is an Aurean doing pretending to be a human?"

"Only half Aurean. My mother was a deserter who'd done some favors for the Scalantrans. She managed to find a home for me here; I am the son of the captain of a Tazzian survey ship that rendezvoused with the Scalantran trader. My father died when I was only ten; I have no idea what became of my mother."

"And the Tazzians permitted this? They wouldn't think kindly of an Aureans in their midst."

I shook my head. "Other than Jana, no one knows. As you might guess, a Zetan woman would have personal reasons for protecting my secret."

She looked at me wide-eyed, and then laughed. "You put a high value on your prowess with your dick, Professor."

I felt myself blush. "I wasn't talking skill. Just basic biology. She is a very large woman with the strength of many men."

"Yet that isn't your real talent. Did you realize you were drawing Orgone energy from me; that your strength was soaring higher, far greater than even mine while I was wearing that gold."

"Does this mean you have to kill me now?" My question was only half in jest.

She tilted her head and studied me. Turning, she reached back to grab my wrist to lead me into the closest alleyway. Once inside, she spun me around and slammed my

back against the wall, hand on my chest. “Of course it does. I’m going to fuck you to death. It’s our way.”

I had no idea if she was serious or joking, unsure if I was going to have to fight her or fuck her. Strangely, I wanted to do both.

Confused, my human half did neither. She rolled her eyes in frustration as she jumped up to wrap her legs around me, her lips finding mine. My Aurean side awoke, and that sense of wild strength rose, radiating from core out to my limbs, muscles hardening. Before I realized what I was doing, I’d slammed her back against the wall, and then grabbed her boobs to use them as handles to lift her higher.

She smiled angelically, and the berserker inside me roared and took over. I grabbed her shoulders and pulled her down on me, taking her with all the alien power I possessed.

And that was just the beginning. We ended up at my place, and fucked our brains out. There was no longer any pretense, only our hunger for each other. Had she never had an Aurean cock before? Probably not. I certainly hadn’t ever had a Velorian, and only with Jana had I found I didn’t have to hold back.

It wasn’t the sort of thing a man liked to admit, but my sex life had been pretty frustrating before that. I’d had to repress the berserker before, and since...

Part Two: Testing Vespvr

Chapter Six

I was flying very fast, slipstream tearing at my clothing, making it almost impossible to breathe. I didn’t know how I’d gotten there, but I was heading directly toward a tall black cliff that was set against a dark, forbidding mountain. Flashes of lightning formed a near continuous ring around the high summit. I tried to climb or turn, desperate to avoid that forbidding

mountain, but someone grabbed me from behind, arms of steel gripping me with fearsome strength. I opened my mouth to scream as they flew me directly into the unyielding rock. A shattering blow as my body expanded into a cloud of vapor, and then I was inside the rock, everything around me glowing — and somehow still alive.

I awoke with a start, sat up in bed, my heart pounding painfully, lungs gasping for air. I didn't know at first where I was or even when it was

I realized that it had been just another dream. One of the increasingly common ones that played out all the way to my death — and beyond. My heart was pounding painfully, but then I suddenly realized that I was in my own bedroom, and that Vespvr was there.

It all came back to me; our shared passion in the flitter, and then here. It should have been enough to banish whatever thoughts had led to that nightmare. How could a dream come true, sex with a Velorian goddess?

My mood had changed, what with such a wondrous reality replacing a tormenting unreality. But I couldn't forget that dream, as much as I wanted to.



Awake herself, she had seen my expression.

“Bad dream?” she whispered in my ear, her voice itself dreamy.

“An out-of-control one,” I nodded. “Every dream seems to have a theme now. And they’re becoming more vivid all the time. Most of them ending in death. But I don’t die.”

“Just voices from your subconscious. Sometimes it pays to listen, if you can decipher the message.”

“Do Supremis and Sapiens minds dream alike?” I wondered, half out-loud.

She released me to rise from the bed and float silently over me, looking every bit like the angels of my childhood stories, except of course for her nudity. “From everything I’ve learned, there is no difference.”

A cloud of angelically blonde hair floated around her as if she was in zero gravity. A glance to my side revealed her familiar gold choker lying on my nightstand.

I suddenly understood my dream. It was my subconscious speaking. She'd been spooned around me while fully empowered, which was potentially very dangerous. If she startled awake from a dream like the one I'd just had, she could have crushed me without even realizing it. Yet in all our intimate time together (well, other than that flitter crash), she'd never hurt me with her strength.

I wanted to ask her to put the gold back on and come back to bed, only to be interrupted by someone pounding on my front door. Vespvr turned to look that way, her eyes briefly glowing with an unnatural blue light. Floating there, she was even more beautiful than I remembered from last night. Benefits of her empowerment. Orgone always pushed her beauty to the next level. Her generous boobs, which were normally on the upper end of human perfection, become so firm they refused to jiggle or bounce no matter how she moved.

I reached up to hold her slender ankle as I tried to pull her back down to me. The hell with whoever was at the front door. But she was once again made of warm steel, immovable, seemingly anchored in mid-air. She smiled softly while lowering her bright gaze to me, and floated down to kneel over me, straddling me the way I love, my ardor pressing eagerly against what was now an inviolate entrance. Despite her firmness, her body seemingly weighing no more than a dry leaf. I wanted nothing more than to make love to her again.

But not without her gold choker. I'd nearly lost my favorite organ last time that happened.

She rolled off me to land lightly beside the bed, her movement indescribably athletic and graceful at the same time.

"You seem to have an insistent visitor this morning."
"They'll go away," I said as I reached out for her wrist. "Come back to bed. Bring the gold."

She shook her head slowly as she floated further away, pulling herself from my grip with both a sexy gentleness and overwhelming power — the bewildering trademark of a Velorian.

“You need to rest up,” she smiled sexily. “I’m not done with you yet. We Velorians are insatiable, don’t you know?”

“Who is it?” I asked, remembering the glow of her eyes when she stared at the wall.

She didn’t answer, and instead floated toward my bedroom door. I smiled as I thought of the look she was about to get, what with her being naked and ripe with the musky scent of our lovemaking. Not to mention walking on air.

There was silence for a moment, and then I heard another woman laugh huskily. I heard Vespyr explaining that it was “just sex. And yes, please inform the police that I will pay for the damages to the flitter. Or anything else that was damaged.”

My waking reverie vanished. Most of my neighbors are professionals, some from the university, many from industry. A very conservative bunch. Likely a few of them had business connections to Gazrall. Word would get out that Vespyr was here. Gazrall would not appreciate his ultra-expensive Companion sharing my bed, and his private security forces were all ex-military. The kind of mercenaries who did whatever Gazrall asked of them. Absolutely whatever.

I heard Vespyr’s laugh filter back from the front door. “A threesome? Oh, I’m sure he’d love that later, but wait until he gets his mojo back. I’m afraid I’ve worn him completely out.”

There was a moment of silence, and then both women laughed, the husky voice blending with Vespyr’s lovely giggle, then the other voice saying: “Well, he’s never been too exhausted before. What with his special genes and all.”

Jana!

I sagged into the bed at the sound of her voice. She was the last person I wanted to see right now. I tried to get up, only to nearly pass out as a wave of lightheadedness

washed over me. Low blood pressure? I grabbed for the bedpost as my knees buckled, struggling to crawl back into bed, where I collapsed into the pillows and was instantly asleep.

* * *

I awoke to the wonderful aroma of bacon and eggs cooking. Sun was streaming in my window. I couldn't help but smile as I woke. Breakfast instead of sex? Vespyn wasn't living up to her exotic billing. But then, she was a professional Companion. Maybe this was how they did things — draining a man and then rebuilding his strength up with a great breakfast. My heart began raced. Of course she would do that. She'd been designed to be the ultimate woman. Then trained to be a Companion.

Some people might see that as a problem. There was still a lot of racism when it came to natural and supernatural beings. Most people put the Supremis in the later category, which is why I'd always hidden my true origins. Maybe it was because of my unusual birthright, but she seemed vastly more interesting than any natural woman. Not just for her profound physical abilities and endless desire for the erotic, but also her keen intellect and compassionate nature. There was nothing artificial about her in my mind. I'd made love to her enough times to know that.

But superhuman?

Absolutely.

That thought, and my grumbling stomach, drove me from the bed. I felt strong and refreshed when my feet hit the floor, hopping around the bedroom, pulling on some shorts and a t-shirt. The bathroom was my first priority. My cock was slightly sore, almost bruised, but otherwise I felt as young and energetic as a teenager again. As adults, we tend to forget how incredibly wonderful it is to be young and perfectly healthy. Probably for good reason.

The compelling aroma from the kitchen drew me out the doorway and into the hall. Passing the tall windows on the south side of the house, I was startled to see the sun

nearly overhead. It wasn't like me to sleep half the day away, so I felt a bit disoriented as I padded softly toward the kitchen.

Pausing in the doorway, I found Jana standing in front of my stove, dressed in a tiny white palmball outfit. Her super-short skirt and running shoes showed off her amazingly defined legs, her calves still pumped up from a recent run. I'd always found it amazing how Jana could be both sexy and fantastically muscular at the same time. Her long, curvy muscles exuded a wild sexiness that made my mouth go dry. Most men thought she was too bulky, almost masculine, but they didn't share my Aurean genes. Jana turned to smile as she sensed me standing in the doorway, her head tilting to the side. Standing at 6'4", she was one of the tallest women on Tazzi.

"So, our lover finally awakes?"

"Our lover...?" I mumbled as I recalled the earlier doorway discussion about a threesome. Surely I'd remember that, and I definitely didn't. Confused now, I entered the kitchen and turned to get some juice from the cooler, only to have my heart skip a few beats as I saw Vespyr standing at the far end of my long kitchen, her head buried in a cabinet. She was still wearing that exotic BioPlas dress, but it had changed to a texture that looked more like knitting than metal foil. Her neck was bare of gold, which said she was fully empowered. Yet instead of looking powerful like Jana, she looked slender and ultra fit, with the longest, cutest legs I'd ever seen. Yet she was in reality orders of magnitude stronger than either Jana or myself.

"He doesn't have any," Vespyr reported from deep inside the closet, obviously in the middle of a conversation about cooking. She stepped back and turned toward me, her face lighting up the room as she smiled, her oversized irises sparkling so blue.



The front of her white knit dress was now decorated with an elaborate starburst of gold and silver threads that radiated from between her breasts. It appeared to be made from thousands of stitches, maybe tens of thousands, yet I knew that in reality her dress was a sub-sentient life form with shape-changing abilities. More Galen magic.

“Good afternoon sleepy-head,” she said. “I thought you were going to snooze the entire day away.”

Confused at finding both women in my kitchen, not to mention learning that it was afternoon, I saw Jana staring hungrily at me, her eyes flicking up and down from the bulge in my crotch. I think that’s the only part of my body that Jana ever liked.

“Yes, its still firmly attached, Jana,” I said, feeling a little overwhelmed and a touch cranky. Jana was pushing her way into my life again.

Jana’s left eyebrow rose. “Vespyr told me how she held onto you while she was lowering that flitter to the parking lot. You scared her, but if she’d asked, I could have told her that you were more superman than man. Especially that organ.”

“*You* were scared, Vespyr?” I blurted out. “What about *me*? You know, when we were falling from the sky and you couldn’t fly? I’m not invulnerable like you.

Vespyr just smiled crookedly as she slipped past me to join Jana at the stove. They made quite the contrast: Jana’s broad shoulders and impressively muscled midriff and athletically trim hips, her fantastically muscled legs, every part of her body developed far past that of any human. But then, she’d grown up under heavy gravity. She was magnificent, but she paled standing next to Vespyr. The Velorian’s slender shoulders traced down to blend into a tightly muscled back, her deeply indented spin tracing the way down to her tiny waist. She had the kind of rounded, heart-shaped butt that only an artist could draw, and the hem of her knit dress was scandalously short. Yet her long, slender legs made it all look precisely right. It would be a crime against nature to hide those wondrous legs.

I’ve known many beautiful women, all of them dancers in fantastic shape, but this was perfection. Even more for the undercurrent of extreme strength that was visible,

starting with the tight dimples behind her knees. The diamond-shaped curves of her upper calves telegraphed her inhuman fitness. Sighing, I lifted my eyes to hers, and drank in the glow of her sunshine blonde hair, forming a golden halo about her. She truly was an angel from heaven above.

“You are beautiful,” I gushed. “And that knit dress — elegant, ridiculously expensive and very proper, or at least as much as a Velorian could ever be proper. The embroidery alone is dazzling.”

She smiled as she glanced down at her chest. “It’s my own design, and the embroidery isn’t BioPlas. I did all of the sewing by hand.”

“Inspired by some Velorian fashion?” I asked. “That starburst is both unusual and dazzling.”

She smiled. “It’s the symbol of a Companion, although I jazzed it up just a bit.”

“Then you have yet another undiscovered talent,” I quipped. “But what’s the occasion for such formal wear?”

Vespyr frowned. “I had an early morning meeting with another of Gazrall’s foundations. He brings me to meetings that he expects will be difficult. I can be rather distracting, floating on thin air and all, everyone staring at my legs.”

I felt a chill stab my heart as reality crashed back in on me. While I’d been sleeping, Vespyr had been running around with that old bastard who owned her, doing who knows what, flaunting her perfection, his cold, clammy hands all over her. I had to close my eyes to force my misplaced thoughts away. This had nothing to do with me. Gazrall had paid tens of millions for her contract, otherwise she wouldn’t be here on Tazzi. She came with an indenture, which per the laws he’d managed to get passed, meant he more or less owned her.

Yet here I was, the stray mongrel who’d kept his bitch screaming all night at the end of a dark alley. Gazrall was going to hate me if word of this got out. He’d supposedly made people disappear for far lesser crimes.

“But don’t worry,” Vespvr said brightly. “You didn’t have any calls on your Comm and Jana kept a close eye on you. She was disappointed when you didn’t wake up.”

Now I was really confused. I’d read that Velorian often couldn’t decipher the intricate sexual innuendo that flowed between humans. Velorian sexual politics was overwhelmingly physical and direct. In their culture, it was the woman who always initiated lovemaking.

I had to change the subject.

“So, how was the meeting?” I asked innocently, trying to be friendly despite my growing anger toward Gazrall.

She shrugged. “The usual. The men all stared at my legs, and then at my chest, all the while signing whatever Gazrall asked them to sign. Guess they like my starburst design.” She laughed softly. “Of course, the women in the room just glared at me, hating both how I look and what I was and resenting the way their men were staring and not thinking straight. Although there was a cute lesbian who looked even more love-struck than even the men.”

It would have been the height of arrogance if any other woman spoke this way, but this was the way Velorian women talked. No hubris, but no false modesty either. Watching her standing there, helping Jana bake something on the stove, I found it reprehensible that she’d willingly tied herself to a Companion contract — to a life of indentured servitude. To a legal arrangement that allowed a billionaire to buy the ultimate woman to warm his bed. Legalized prostitution? No, worse. Legalized slavery.

Blinking, I tried to push my dark thoughts away. Vespvr turned to whisper something to Jana, who she set down her spatula and wrapped her powerful arms around Vespvr, the two of them kissing passionately. I suddenly felt like a stranger in my own kitchen. That and a strange sense of betrayal. Had she slept with both me and with Jana in the same night?

I shook my head, angry at my misplaced anger. What the hell else should I have expected? She was a Velorian. Fidelity wasn’t even a word in their language. They’d just

as soon fuck someone as shake their hand. She wasn't someone I could afford to get emotional about. She'd break my heart a dozen ways to Sunday.

I forced my eyes from them to look around my kitchen. For the first time since I'd lived here, it looked as if it were really being cooked in. Cartons and spice bottles and egg shells and bowls and utensils were scattered all over the counters. I hoped whatever they were making was worth the mess.

They ended their long kiss and started to whisper words I couldn't hear. Then they both laughed, and Jana announced to me; "We're going to call you superman from now on," Jana giggled over her powerful shoulder. "On account your... you know, superpower." She started to laugh before burying her face against Vespvr's neck, her body shaking with laughter.

"Did all that... you know, really happen last night?"
"You mean, did you seriously try to fuck my brains out?" Vespvr chuckled. "Yes, and you were growing stronger by the minute as you lapped up my Orgone like a drowning man?"

"Lapping it up..." I gasped. Orgone was the ultimate energy source, but we'd never been able to contain it in a lab. If anyone ever does, they'll have the ultimate weapon.

Jana, lifted one eyebrow to give me a weird look. "You were a very bad boy, Kevin," she scolded. "Leaving the dance hall like that. I had to take care of those lovely scholassies all by myself. They were so young. So enthusiastic. So... willing."

As much as I usually enjoyed Jana's sexy, irreverence, I didn't want her here. Not now.

"Ah, is this going to be awkward?" I asked. "You know... with both of you here?"

"It didn't work," Vespvr said, ignoring my new question as she answered her earlier one. "I've still got my brains. But it was a very nice try."

I slumped further in my chair. I felt like both a prize stallion and a bit of a third wheel. That kiss had been amazing. What is it about my attraction to lesbian lovers? And not just me.

“We’ve been talking about your talents,” Jana declared, confirming my worst fears. “Vespyr has decided that you are more Aurean than human. In one way, at least.”

All hope was lost. They were going to gang up on me. I stared angrily at Vespyr, then at Jana. Neither of them blinked.

“Don’t worry, Kevin, we have no secrets here,” Vespyr said. “Jana always knew you were Aurean.”

“Half,” I reminded her.

“All I know is that no other guy has ever been able to get me going and keep me going the way you do,” Jana added. “But apparently Vespyr found a few buttons to push that even I missed.”

I clenched my fists, feeling more like an object than a man. I didn’t need this. Especially not while half awake and hungry. My DNA was my own damn business. I was starting to open my mouth to protest when Jana said: “You’re a halfling. Isn’t that what the Aureans would call you?”

“Right before they killed him,” Vespyr added. “They hate halflings even more than they hate Velorians. No Aurean wants to admit it, but they are still close enough to humans to procreate with them, at least in the case of special women. Their men tend to be a bit overwhelming for most women to handle. You know, the old “split you open and blow your head off” thing.”

“What the fuck...?” I started to say, but she kept going.

“Fortunately Kevin is enough of an Aurean to consume Orgone. Something I hadn’t expected even after I learned about his birthright.”

I waved my hand. “Enough about my birthright. If you tell anyone, I’m doomed. You know how much Aureans are hated here. I’d be fired and likely deported, my citizenship revoked.”

“Your humungous secret is safe with us,” Jana winked, drawing her fingers over her lips as if zipping them up.

Vespyr said nothing.

“So... exact what are you guys doing here in my kitchen anyway?” I asked. Jana took a long sip of her coffee as she gave Vespyr a silent look. Vespyr nodded slightly toward the door. “Give Kevin and me a minute, would you please, Jana?”

Jana’s face fell for a moment, and then her eyes hardened in anger. She tore off her apron.

“OK, ok... I get it. Please give me a call sometime, Vespyr.”

She turned to look meaningfully at me. “You too, Kevin. We can be honest with each other now.”

She spun around and headed for the door.

“Jana, wait,” Vespyr said.

Jana turned around to see Vespyr holding a key. To my front door. Jana turned to look at me. “What do you suppose I should do with this, Kevin?”

I started to hold out my hand, but Vespyr placed it firmly in Jana’s and closed her fingers. She leaned close to give her another kiss.

“As we discussed, Jana dear,” Vespyr said when their lips finally parted, “there are after-effects to last night, especially given his Aurean blood. You and Kevin have some history, and you are phenomenally strong for a Terran. You will be needed during his rebound.”

Jana grinned as she closed her sinewy fingers around the key and spun around to walk out the front door. There was a carnivorous look in her eyes as they caught mine. “See you soon then, big boy.”

“What was all that about?” I angrily asked. “Talking about me as if I wasn’t here? After effects? What are they?”

“We’ll talk soon. Right now I’m trying to cook a soufflé the way she just showed me. Did you know that Jana trained under a world-class chef for nearly a year?”

“I don’t care about Jana, Vespvr. All I know is that last night was incredible. And scary too. One moment I’m making love to you, having the best sex of my life by far, and the next moment I’m certain I’m going to die. Everything blurs, and the next thing I know we’re having even better sex in a rat-infested alley. Then I wake up in my bed. With you.”

She laughed. “Serves you right for picking me up in the first place. Velorians are very dangerous, don’t you know?”

“Picked you up? Hah. I distinctly remember it otherwise. The way you danced. That was pure seduction. And you were the one who dragged me out the door and into that damned flitter. My feet never touched the ground.”

Vespvr chuckled. “All right. Yes. I did. Guilty as charged. But if that flitterman had known how to fly properly, it could have really been fun. Air sex is always great.”

“I don’t think flitter jockeys receive combat training, Vespvr. But after that crash... wow! You are brilliant at orgasm. You come with an endless supply, I presume.”

“Are you trying to get me back in bed?” she challenged, trying not to smile.

“Damn right...”

“Well, you can’t. Your body can’t handle any more of me right now. And yes, the supply is more or less infinite. But it requires two to dance a proper morango.”

“Seemingly male or female,” I added. I couldn’t help but be curious about she and Jana.

“Females are fun in bed, and we connect on more levels, and for a lot longer session. But nothing beats a man’s insane rutting, at least when it comes to intensity. I suppose I’m greedy, because having lovers of both genders is heaven for me.”

“So, do you have any other skills I don’t know about? Besides death defying mayhem that’s cleverly disguised as sex?”

“Well, you can tell me when this soufflé is done.”

She turned from the stove to float toward me. Settling down to straddle me, she hiked her already micro skirt over her hips. She wrapped her arms around my neck and leaned down to kiss me. I hugged her tightly enough to have crushed ribs, but her gorgeous curves were carved from sensuous steel, yet feather-light in my arms. Incredibly flexible too. I lifted my hand to cup her breast, and reassuringly found she wasn't hard everywhere. Twirling my thumb around her firm nipple, I felt it turn to steel, rising to poke against her knit top. She wiggled suggestively in my lap, her movements in time with my encircling finger.

"I have to say, I've never had such an interesting night, Kevin. Or been with a guy who had so much... I don't know the word, oomph? This soufflé is just my way of saying thanks."

"Oomph?"

"You know what I mean. You kept me going all night. No other man has done that."

"And Jana? How does she fit into this?"

"My pheromones were affecting most of the people in that club. I was radiating them like crazy as I tried to impress you. Jana is bisexual enough to respond to them. Simple."

I swelled with pride. "So, your pheromones work on women too?"

"On some. Yes."

"You should know that Jana's been faithful to her husband, Vespvr. She doesn't want to break her vows. Pheromones or not."

"You guys..." Vespvr said with a slow shake of her head. "Let me clue you in. She didn't just come and dig you out of your office to save you from yourself. She and Geoffrey have separated."

I stared at her as I tried to get my thoughts around that. "But... but that doesn't make sense. They were a great couple. She kept talking about her marriage vows last night. And how would you know about Geoffrey in the first place?"

Vespyr shrugged. "I did some research when I was trying to figure out how to meet you. As far as the rest, what can I say? I'm still learning about human sexuality. It's far more complicated than Velorian customs. We mostly focus on the physical, but you humans tie your relationships up with every emotion in the book. Layers on layers of impossible complication and jealousy."

"And here I thought last night was getting a bit complicated."

"Not emotionally it wasn't."

I wasn't sure how to take that. Velorians are infamous for acting on their impulses. Sexually at least. They don't believe in subterfuge. Or any of the usual mating games. They love to have fun and playfulness and pleasure. Their females approached sex analogously to the way many human men did, seeking out the hottest guy in the room to get laid.

"As far as Jana goes," Vespyr continued, "it was all I could do to convince her you needed your sleep this morning. I figured you'd had enough experience finding your cock in unexpected places for one night."

"Unexpected places...?" I laughed. "Yeah... I didn't see you coming. Ever. Especially given my... dark side."

Vespyr smiled. "Sorry if I scared you at first. It has been a while since I had a real man."

My pride swelled further. "Well, I'm not scared of you any more."

"You should be. But there has never been any accounting for the boundless aspirations of horny Aureans around Velorians."

"How would I know? You're the first Supremis I've met. I grew up among ordinary humans. I've never even met an Aurean, face to face that is."

"Hopefully, you never will."

"Jealousy?"

“No, just survival. Yours. I’m the only Vel in this quadrant. All the other Supremis out here are Aureans, and there are more of them than you know. You do know what they do to halfings?”

I shook my head, guessing it wasn’t good.

“The Primal males would pull you apart for sport. Slowly ripping your limbs off. Torture beyond imagination. It’s amazing how hard it is to kill anyone with Aurean blood. Or how long it takes. But they’d figure it out.”

I couldn’t suppress the cold shiver that ran through me. “Well, I guess you’re my protector now.”

“Not exactly,” she said with a slow shake her head. Her face grew sad. “I have a very formal agreement with Gazrall that trumps anything else I might want to do.”

A flash of anger and jealousy filled me again. That rich bastard! Owing her. It was all I could do to keep my voice low as I tried to change the subject to a more pleasant one.

“I will say one thing, Vespvr: I’ve never known a woman who went so crazy during sex as you did. Hell, I lost count of how many times you came.”

“I’m a goddess, don’t you know?” she winked as she floated from my lap to return to the stove. “And you aren’t supposed to count them. My people weren’t made to have any limits.”

“Made?”

“As in genetically engineered. How much do you know about the Supremis?”

“More than I did yesterday. But otherwise, not that much more than the average guy. And as far as measuring and counting things, I’m an experimental physicist, Vespvr. We measure everything.

“Let me clue you in, Kevin — an orgasm isn’t physics. It’s biology.”

“Yeah, but I’m really good at higher math.”

She giggled. “Hope I wasn’t too much for you. Gold or not.”

“Too much? Isn’t that the literal definition of being Velorian?”

“Funny boy.”

The expression on her face said she wanted to say more, but something was holding her back. I decided to push a bit. “So why the hell would you sign on with an old bastard like Gazrall anyway?”

Her smile vanished. “The usual 99 year contract reason. Money for my homeworld. As a result, I’m bound to him in all ways; sexually most of all. But unlike you, he can’t do it.”

I just stared at her, not believing what I’d just heard. “What?”

“You heard me. Can’t do it. Even with me.”

“How could that be? Any man can afford the right drugs. Surgery. Implants. And with his billions...?”

“He’s pathologically afraid of doctors. Wouldn’t even have surgery for testicular cancer until it was too late. He could have gotten a transplant, I guess — but what he really needs is a new body to attach it to.”

“Well, fortunately nobody here can get a full clone job. And even if they could, you can hardly transfer the details of one’s mind to another body.”

Vespyr shrugged. “Not on Tazzi. But elsewhere... I think so.” She shrugged. “But look on the bright side. This proves that there is some balance in the universe. Justice even. He’s got his cold billions, but you’re fantastically good in bed with me. I’m sure there are days when he’d gladly give up his billions if he could trade places with you.”

“That feeling is hardly reciprocal!” I protested. “Money isn’t everything.”

She smiled weakly. “Spoken by a man without any. You should know that technically I have to ask him before we sleep together again. Not that I would. Ask that is. That kind of charity seldom begins at home, and never with a man like Gazrall. He so

loves his possessions, and I'm his favorite one. What happened last night has to remain our secret."

My balloon burst. "A possession? Is that all you are to him? And even if so, who says you can't have an affair like everyone else?"

"My contract. My loyalty must be un-compromised."

"Bollocks! You have the rights of any human."

She reached out to gently stroke my cheek. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. But the problem is that I'm not exactly human."

I didn't like where this was going.

"Is the gold choker his?" I asked.

"Gold chokers are standard issue for Companions. Only not with a Vendorian steel thread like this one. That's something Gazrall added back when I first met him. Once he learned how strong I was."

"Sounds like a slave collar. Something from the ancient past."

Vespyr glared at me as she angrily rose to walk over and open the oven door. She took the hot pan out and held it with her bare hands while walking over to transfer the wondrous smelling soufflé to my plate. She then paused to look down at me.

"There are a few things I'd rather not talk about, Kevin. Specifically, any sentence with the word slave in it. Indenture isn't slavery. It's voluntary. And just so you know, the choker comes in handy at other times too."

"Oh, so I'm not the only lucky man, huh?"

"Actually, you are. Technically. Gazrall can no longer rise to the occasion, but he has his... things. Automatons. Androids that he purchased from the Vendorians. Very lifelike. He has this sensory link with them. Feels what they feel, more or less."

I stared at her, my mind filling with some truly disgusting images. Robots with surging super-dicks and some wrinkled old man getting off from it all. My stomach

cramped up as I tried to push those disgusting images away. “I really didn’t need to hear about that.”

“Good, because I’m not telling you any more. But you were prying into my life. I’m sorry it’s not very nice.”

I cursed under my breath. In the course of the last few minutes, I’d managed to stumble over two things that clearly bothered her. And me. I really had to change the subject.

“So, imagine the stories that flitterman must be telling everyone today.”

“Not if he knows what’s good for him,” Vespyr said with a shake of her blonde head. “If word gets back to Gazrall, any witnesses to our indiscretion will end up dead in some alleyway trash can. I delivered a little package this morning to ensure the cabby’s discretion, along with a warning. A couple of year’s pay for a flitterman. His leg was burned very painfully from my heat vision, so I’m confident he understands the consequences if he were to talk.”

The idea of paying off the flitterman for his silence was disgusting. But clearly, being Gazrall’s woman, money meant nothing to her. “Lady, you are something else.”

“Lady? You should hear what most people call me behind their back. When they think I can’t hear them.”

Try as I might, I couldn’t stay mad at her. I hated the idea of her buying someone’s silence, but she’d truly been acting in the flitterman’s best interests. Gazrall’s goons would not be so gentle.

“Then I guess I’m going to have to call you My Charitable Lady of Flight from the Golden Planet.”

She filled her plate and then sat down across the table from me. Her face grew serious. “There’s more going on here than you know, Kevin. I don’t know what you know about your Aurean side, but in contact with our skin, gold changes the effect of our pheromones — that perfume you noticed. They normally serve as a sexual intoxication for men — pushing their libidos into such high gear that they can’t control their desires.

So naturally I try to keep them throttled back. But when wearing gold, my pheromones intoxicate me in much the same way. It also changes them so that they work on a man's whole endocrine system, not just the libido part. That's why you got stronger and had such incredible endurance. Once those dormant Aurean genes of yours were released, you started giving off a male version of the pheromone."

"Is that why Jana was camped on my doorstep this morning?"

"She only had a brief exposure to my pheromones, and she likes male lovers more than females. It was your pheromones that pushed us both over the edge. I didn't realize what was happening until I tasted your blood."

"You're saying there is something in my scent that attracts the opposite sex?" She nodded. "Absolutely. But it went absolutely haywire around me."

A light blinked on as I told her about my days of competitive dancing. How I always went home with the hottest girl, no matter who she'd come with. A big problem given more than a few guys had tried to settle that score with their fists. But I'm very strong and a good fighter and I'm very hard to hurt. But as far as the women's attraction to me, I'd always assumed it was just my dancing.

"Right, so imagine how I feel, Kevin, being amped up that way all the time. Not to mention the way I look compared to human women. Flitters crash into each other if I just walk down a street. And when I enter a room I can hear every heart beating. People stare, unable to speak and their hearts race like jungle drums. Gazrall calls it 'the sound of everyone falling in love with me'. He gets off on owning the object of every man's desire."

"Coming from anyone else, that would be an incredibly arrogant statement," I said, worried now. I wasn't sure where this was going.

"Anyway, Jana told me she'd indulged those scholassies all night and then ran twenty miles this morning while working the rest of the frustration out of her system. Didn't work. I'm afraid she's hooked on your pheromones. You need to be considerate of her."

"I don't want Jana, Vespyr. I want you."

“You can’t have me.”

“I’ll share you then.”

“Gazrall doesn’t share,” she reminded me. “And you’ll be dead of old age before my contract ends.”

“We have to find a way,” I pleaded.

“There isn’t. But you’ll be fine, Kevin. My pheromones have peaked and are now fading very fast in your system. You aren’t addicted thanks to your Aurean blood.”

She was pushing me away. I felt crushed, but I couldn’t show it. “So we both lose,” I said despairingly. “Guess I’m too wasted anyway. Drained.”

“There’s a reason for that too. You started to metabolize Orgone last night. Some Betans can do that in a limited way, and that’s what made you so strong and energetic. You were drawing sexual power from my body to make yourself stronger. I hadn’t expected that, and I lost myself in your pleasures. But unfortunately, as often happens when I lose myself, I drew all that energy back from you during my passion — and then some. That’s why you feel so drained. Absorbing Orgone is one of the ways we fight Aureans. We suck up your life energy, more or less.”

“Orgone? You’re kidding? In my body? That’s incredibly powerful stuff.”

“You had just a tiny trace of it in you. But your body apparently can channel it, draw it from my body, at least during sex. Quite remarkable. I’ve never met another Betan who could do that, but I’ve heard of them.”

I thought of Gazrall, and not in a kindly way. “So, despite all we did last night, you left me while I was sleeping and did your thing with your boss, huh?”

“If you mean the publicity thing, then yeah. And he’s not my boss but my contract holder. A Companion’s contract is supposed to be sacrosanct.”

“But yours no longer is.”

She shrugged again. “He suspects something, so he’s punishing me by having me make daily public appearances. I’m supposed to promote his softer side, or so he describes it. It’s all contrived, but at least I can get out of the compound now.”

I wasn’t going to talk about Gazrall. “So when did Jana show up here?” I asked, changing the subject.

“About 5:30. I had to be home by seven to get ready for that meeting, so I didn’t have much time to help her.”

“Help her?” I asked, jaw dropping. “You mean the two... of you... while I slept?” Vespyr shrugged. “She really wanted to wake you. I gave her something else to think about for a little while.”

I shook my head. “I so don’t want to know.” That was a lie. I wanted to know everything.

“Good, because I’m not telling you more.”

“So...” I asked after a pregnant pause, waving my fork in the air, my mouth full of soufflé, “how long before I’m... you know, ready to go like that again?”

Vespyr shook her head as she took a sip of the espresso she’d made. “Who knows. Days. A week or so. What I do know is that you’d better ease back into the saddle.”

I just stared at her, my burgeoning pride deflating. Was last night really just a one-night stand?

“Besides, I’ve got other plans for us today,” she continued. “Plans that don’t involve sex. Want to hear?”

“Sounds pretty dull in comparison to last night.”

“Trust me. It won’t be.”

“Whatever,” I shrugged with my mouth half full. I finally realized what I was tasting. “Damn — this soufflé is good.”

Vespyr smiled nervously as she leaned back in her chair and took a deep breath before speaking again. My heart sank as I watched her body language. Bad news was coming.

“So, here’s the bottom line, Kevin. I’ve been trying to find a way to say this, so I’ll just say it. You have a GAR and I need to test it.”

I started to choke as my mouthful went down the wrong way. Eyes wide, I stared across the table at her, my weariness and pain suddenly replaced by fear.

I swallowed hard. “What... what did you just say?”

“I said I want to test your GAR.”

“That’s impossible... besides, it’s classified Top Secret, and it’s hardly *my* GAR... and how did you even know...?” I stopped as it suddenly hit me. Of course. “Gazrall has his hooks that deeply into the government?”

“Yes. Given that he finances the election campaigns of some key politicians on the Defense Committee. His companies are also tightly connected to the Armory, at least when it comes to new tech. He knew about the GAR from the very start, and he has all the details about your role in testing it — he also personally witnessed the destruction of the *Admiral Kirkland* from another ship. That scared him silly. He’s terrified that all his billions and all his people and resources can’t protect him against weapons like that. He’s not sure even I can protect him now.”

It felt as if a veil had suddenly been removed from my eyes to be replaced with perfect vision. And I didn’t like what I saw at all.

“So he really does own you, like all the others. Was last night just payment in advance? Gazrall’s way of getting me on his payroll, too?”

Vespyr rose to walk stiffly toward the sink. She sagged slightly, her head hanging as she stared down at the dirty dishes. “None of this is as simple as you think, Kevin.”

“But that isn’t even the point, Vespyr. You came on to me last night because of the GAR.”

Her blonde head bobbed. "That's true. But Gazrall had nothing to do with it, other than his telling me about the GAR and his fear of the Aureans. I came to you on my own."

I clenched my teeth, wishing that was true. She might have a pure heart, but Gazrall's was black as coal. "Nothing you do can be divorced from Gazrall, Vespyr. He's just playing you like he does everyone else. He knew you'd come after me once you knew about the GAR."

She started to shake her head, and then shrugged. "Maybe. All I can say is that last night was my decision, Kevin. Mine only. And I'm glad I met you. You were really great. And not just the sex. You're a good man. An honest man. To you, integrity isn't just a word. It's a way of living. It's been a long time since I met someone like that."

Liquid fire flowed in my veins as my Aurean blood rose. Gazrall represented everything that was wrong on Tazzi. I wasn't going to listen to this.

"Get out of here," I said through clenched teeth. "Go back to your lord and master." My temper has always been my Achilles heel, but I didn't give a damn now.

She spun around to grab my arm, her grip painfully tight. "Quit thinking with your dick and use your head, Kevin. You're half Terran, so stop thinking like an Aurean. Did you really think I'd discuss the most highly classified secret on the planet in a night club. I'm concerned about Tazzians and Velor. Gazrall be damned."

"Bollocks," I shouted as I angrily tried to pull away. I couldn't break her grip, and that made me feel even more violated. "You met me at the club to make it easier to seduce me. Didn't you?"

She looked into my eyes for a second, and then nodded. "True. I knew I was going to sleep with you before I ever came to that club. But I did my homework first, Kevin."

"Homework? I'm not your god-damned student."
"I learned that you are the most innovative high energy physicist on Tazzi. And that you aren't married or attached. That was important."

"Then why didn't you just ask me about it first?"

“Because you’d deny it, of course. Everything about the GAR is top secret. The Armory owns your silence, so don’t get all moralistic on me.”

I cursed under my breath as I struggled to push my Aurean blood anger away. Of course I would have refused to help her get anywhere near the GAR. Or even acknowledge knowledge of it. But my heart was still pounding.

“Supposedly Velorians always tell the truth when asked a direct question, Vespyr. Or is that another myth?”

She glared at me. “As if you’re listening to anything now.”

The pounding in my veins slowed. “It’s said you don’t indulge in the white lies we Terrans love so much, let alone the black ones.”

“Another legend,” Vespyr shrugged. “We have learned to adapt to the situation.” Her eyes snapped up to focus on mine. “But I’ve been frank with you. I always will.” “Then tell me what you want with my GAR.”

“I already told you... to test it.”

“Haven’t you figured it out yet? Don’t you *get* it? I have plenty of videos of the tests. You can see that it destroyed anything it touched. Even diamond. Nothing we found can resist that beamer.”

“There is something that’s possibly tough enough to withstand it.”

I laughed derisively. “What, Vendorian steel? The ship I destroyed was coated with a very thin layer. We don’t have enough to form a thicker armor.”

She reached down to lift my hands and placed them over her warm breasts. “**Me.**”

I blinked, my heart leaping excitedly as I thrilled to the feel of her body under my hands again. Was she going to seduce me again? I tried to pull my hands away, but she held me too tightly, her breasts yielding deliciously beneath my hands.

“What are you talking about?” I demanded, struggling to still sound angry.

“We Supremis females store Orgone in our breasts, Kevin. It’s the most powerful energy in the universe... as if you didn’t know that.”

“So what? You have no idea what that weapon is capable...”

She pushed me away as she spun around to reach into the drawer to her right, and pulled out the powerful pistol I kept there. She pointed it at me.

I backed away. “Now wait a minute. I’m not bulletproof or anything.”

“But I am.”

She turned the gun on herself, sticking the heavy barrel into her mouth as she pulled the trigger. A muffled bang filled the room as smoke puffed out her nose and ears. She removed the barrel and coughed up more smoke, and then spit a crushed bullet out onto the counter with a clink. Then, before I could react, she slowly crushed the gun in her bare hands, wringing the gun steel out as if it was merely a wet sponge, all while glaring at me. She tossed an unrecognizable blob of smoking steel on the counter.

“You aren’t thinking straight, Kevin. This weapon may have been created to kill my people. I have to know. It’s vital to Velorian security. You have to shoot me with it.”

My mouth fell open. “That’s... that’s insane. It would vaporize you. Like that!” I snapped my fingers.

“If so, then Velor has to know that. If we don’t stop them now, they’ll take over every world, starting by eliminating all the Companions along with any halflings like you that get in their way. But maybe, just maybe, we can stop them in time — if we can find a way to defend ourselves from such a weapon.”

I couldn’t take all that in. Like most people, I’d heard the rumors about Supremis invulnerability – that it was supposedly absolute. Yet she was nothing like the hulking Aurean warriors I’d seen in pictures. She was elegant and slender and beautiful in an otherworldly, almost elfish way.

“That’s too insane to even consider,” I said with a shake of my head, my words slow and deliberate. “In one test, Vespyr, we included a cow’s carcass inside a container

made out of high-carbon steel that was encased in the type of hybrid ceramic we make bulletproof vests out of. I rigged a Grade 8 forcefield around all that. Toughest target we can make. Yet it was all instantly vaporized. Not even a wisp of smoke escaped the annihilation. The carcass and the ceramic/steel box simply ceased to exist.”

“I’m not a cow, Kevin, and I’m not an ordinary. Don’t confuse my femininity with weakness. A classic mistake with Vels. As you saw, even your best steel is but a soft, yielding material in my hands.”

“Yet you are still made of flesh and blood, Vespyr. You can’t be serious about this!”

“You know I am, Kevin.”

“I can’t... I won’t...” I sputtered, mind reeling. “The concept alone is insane.”

Her chest rose as she took a deep breath, and then she sighed deeply. “Look, I get it that after last night you think of me in romantic terms, Kevin. Infatuation amplified by pheromones. That’s normal. Also that you’re angry with me for not leveling with you at first. That’s normal too. But I really am invincible. Invulnerable. Pick your word. You just saw that. I need to do this test.”

“Test? You mean suicide. Or homicide if I’m shooting that damn weapon. This is pure insanity! Your people have never faced a weapon like this. And if the Aureans designed it to kill Velorians as you suspect, then you know they’ve tested it. On a captured Velorian if not their own Primes, knowing those bastards.”

“Aureans have diverged from the original Velorian genetic line, Kevin, genetically as well as culturally. We don’t know for a fact that this thing works on me, and that’s what we need to find out. We can start with my foot. I can live without one if it comes to that. My last communication from Velor, nearly a year ago now, said to be on the lookout for new and more powerful Aurean weapons. To test them and report at top priority.”

“On yourself? They said to test them on yourself?”

“Not exactly.”

“Well, *I’ll* be exact. Its destructive power is beyond belief, Vespyr. The tunneling beam that creates an evacuated passageway for the disruptor beam, which reacts with the air or anything else to annihilate anything in its path. That beam alone is more powerful than any of our lasers. We don’t even know the type of energy involved.”

“Which means you don’t know that I can’t handle it. My training program involved handling high bursts of energy, Kevin. Beamers, projectiles, electromagnetic guns... everything the Aureans or Vendorians had in their armories.”

“But you’ve seen nothing like this, Vespyr. And hell, aren’t you still made of matter? Because that’s what this thing eats for breakfast.”

“You don’t know that, Kevin. You already mentioned Vendorian steel. Likely a thick enough layer can resist the beam, and like that super-metal, I’m not made of normal matter. The binding between the atoms of my body works similar to Vendorian steel. Highly non-linear bonding. Fifth order. Also, Orgone is the most powerful form of energy in the universe, and I store it in my breasts. Your kisses were all over them last night and you didn’t glow in the dark or explode or anything. If I can keep that kind of power in, I can keep the GAR beam out.”

I frowned. I hadn’t thought of that. Orgone was so difficult to capture and contain that there was little research data available to describe it.

“My people were made to channel Orgone and store it,” she continued, lifting my hands to her chest again. “And once I store it, it doesn’t... leak or anything. If it did, you and half this city wouldn’t exist.”

“So what’s any of that got to do with the GAR?”

“Simple. The GAR beamer has to be powered by a form of Orgone. Nothing else I know of would be remotely powerful enough to fuel it. You said yourself it wasn’t anything you’d studied before.”

I was shocked by her deduction. Our tests had never confirmed that, but that was one of the more radical suppositions my team members had proposed. Except none of

us knew how to artificially capture and contain Orgone, let alone detect and measure it. She saw the look in my eyes and smiled.

“If so, then my body will absorb the beamer, not to mention the heat of the reaction. I’ll suck it all up like a sponge and store it.”

I shook my head as I remembered the violence seen during the tests. “You haven’t seen the weapon work. Its beyond horrific.”

I stared at her marvelous breasts, sitting so high and firm on her chest. She was talking about transferring energy from that ugly weapon to their beauty? Had she lost her mind?

“So maybe it kills Supremis men but not women?” she shrugged.

“That would be useless against you guys. Your men don’t even fight.”

“Never assume too much about the Aureans. They don’t think for themselves very much. If orders from some ignorant superior said to test it on their soldiers, that’s all they would have done. And most of their soldiers are men, and I can handle a hundred times more Orgone than any male. Also more than any Aurean female.”

“And this is what Velor told you to do?” I asked again, dumbfounded. She shook her head. “As I said, they weren’t specific. They never are. But I do have a basic education in physics, Kevin. I’ve been thinking about the possibility of modulated Orgone beamers ever since I heard rumors of the GAR.”

That surprised me. Not just that she had some scientific training (Why would a Companion need that?), but that she’d been contemplating Orgone beamers, a technology that was so far over the horizon that it was pure science fiction.

“But why does this have to be done on the sly, Vespyr? I’m sure Gazrall has the brass to sanction a public demonstration and record it to send to your people. All he has to do is bankroll it.”

“We need to keep this private. Especially from Gazrall.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If word gets out and gets back to the Aureans, they might find a way to adjust their tech. Find a true weakness. Besides, humans don’t know as much as they think they do about Velorians. They’re blinded by all the porn holos not to mention the boogeymen talk about Aureans.”

My head was starting to hurt as I tried to wrap it around all those layers of logic.

“Obviously Gazrall knows better given he has you.”

Vespyr shook her head. “He knows at one level, but I encourage him to think of me in fairly narrow terms. Few humans can grasp how powerful we truly are.”

“But it’s all right to scare the living daylights out of *me*?”

“You’re a physicist. A scientist by avocation and mindset. You don’t confuse mythology with fact. You follow data, wherever it leads.”

“You really are serious about this?” I asked incredulously.

“Serious enough to find another physicist to give me access to the GAR if you won’t.”

That meant Mitchel, who would naturally enlist Hendrickson. I started to grind my teeth as I envisioned her seducing the two of them to her cause. Damn her. First Mitchel’s threats and now hers. I pulled my hands away from her, clenching my fists at my sides as my Aurean blood rose again.

“Why not just ship the damn thing to Velor? If that’s really what it’s all about.”

“And how exactly would I go about that?” she said impatiently. “Sneak it onto a Scalantran ship?”

“You wouldn’t have to tell them what it was.”

“It would never reach Velor. The Scalantrans scan everything brought on board, and they are already looking for GARs. The factor general already knows about the GAR — and not just the light version, I’ll warrant he’s under orders to get hold of an example of a heavy GAR, like the one we have. He’ll think only of his TIO, and not helping Velor.”

“They come in two sizes?”

“Probably more than two,” Vespvr shrugged. “The Aureans leave little to chance. They must be building an army.”

My head spun. How could she know more than what had been in that intercepted Scalantran document?

“Beyond that,” she continued, “no Scalantran ship is due here for more than two years.” She shook her head, blonde hair flying. “No, I have to test it here, and then find a way to send the results and any engineering data we can glean to Velor, who will work with the Vendorians to counter it.” She stood up even straighter, and took a deep breath. “We must be willing to take any risk. Even the ultimate one.”

“How can you be *sure* this isn’t simple suicide?”

Vespvr exhaled nervously, and then shrugged. “I am prepared to suffer a bit of discomfort. Even disfigurement.”

“Discomfort!!” I choked as I realized she was running on pure bravado. “Vespvr, there is no possible way I’m helping you with this! That... that weapon is obscene. It’s pure death. It doesn’t belong in a civilized universe.”

“But it does exist. In our universe and in increasing numbers. And if a GAR doesn’t belong here, then maybe I don’t either, because if I’m right, I’m powered by the same obscene stuff as that weapon. I’ll find someone else to help me.”

She spun around on her heel and marched angrily toward the door. She paused with her hand on the doorknob, and looked back at me. “Oh... and remember, you were powered by a little of that same stuff last night, Kevin. Just so you know.”

Before I could open my mouth, she ripped my heavy door off its hinges and tossed it across my living room to slam into the bedroom wall. The blast of air nearly knocked me out of my chair.

I closed my eyes for a brief moment, telling myself not to follow her, that she was working me again. First seduction and now this. But my body had a mind of its own. I

sprinted for the doorway, arriving just in time to see her leap from the ground and accelerate straight up into the sky, moving almost too fast to track with my enhanced eyes. A small vapor cloud forming around her tiny waist as she went supersonic. Seconds later, her sonic boom flattened my loose shirt against my chest as it set off a number of alarms.

I turned and ran toward the flitter garage, cursing my stupidity. I couldn't catch her, but now I realized I needed help.

Chapter Seven

I was pounding on Jana's door fifteen minutes later.

She answered the door with a frown, her sheer negligee leaving nothing to the imagination. "Kevin, what the bejewel are you doing...?"

"Where is she? Vespyr? You guys talked this morning. Or whatever. What were her plans for this afternoon?"

Jana crossed her sinewy arms beneath her huge breasts and leaned against the doorframe, staring at me like I was an idiot. "So, you already had a fight with your little goddess. That's really dumb."

"Look, Jana, this is serious business. I need to talk to her."

"Call her lord and master. Her owner."

"This has nothing to do with Gazrall. Any more than what you do has anything to do with your husband anymore."

"Ooh... he takes it down the field and scores," Jana snorted. She hesitated for a moment and then opened the door wider. "Get in here."

I wasn't prepared for the grandeur of her home. It was at least four times the size of mine with an attached sunroom that was itself larger than my entire dwelling. She'd furnished it with expensive and discerning taste. She'd married a wealthy man back when

I was slowly evolving from starving student to struggling professor. A choice I always suspected she regretted, although that might just be my ego speaking.

“It certainly paid to marry a rich man,” I muttered under my breath, trying not to appear overly impressed as I followed her over to sit in the sunlight that was streaming in through the glass sunroom. It was so filled with exotic plants that I felt as if I was sitting in a tropical garden. Delicate harp music was barely audible in the background, along with the songs of many birds. Amazing.

Jana still had her arms crossed tightly, her body tense. “So, are you looking to talk to her or fuck her again, Kevin?”

I blinked as her question jerked my thoughts back to the reason I came. “It’s vital that I talk with her before she does something really dangerous.”

“So does that mean we have a chance then?” she asked.
“This isn’t about us, Jana. Or sex. It’s about...I... I can’t tell you what it’s about. Just that it’s not what you think. And that it’s really important. To all of us.”

She shook her head. “Not good enough, Kevin. Either I’m in or out. No secrets anymore.”

I clenched my fists. “This potentially affects everyone on the planet, Jana. It’s also incredibly delicate. Highest Most Secret. Isn’t that enough?”

“No.”

I frowned as I remembered Vespyr’s advice as she pushed me toward Jana. What had she already said to her? Was Jana blackmailing me? No, something else had to be going on here. She had me and she knew it. Jana had always been stubborn and single-mindedly focused.

“All right. Fine,” I shrugged, knowing I wouldn’t have to do anything right now. “As soon as I’m recovered. Now where is she?”

“You were always good to me, baby,” she smiled. “So when do you get better?”

“I... hell, I don’t know. But I need to find Vespyr right now.”

She glared angrily at me for a moment, and then relented. Whatever else we'd been to each other, we'd always been honest. "She'll be at that new shelter for fallen women and children. Down on Grub Street." She glanced at the decorative clock on the wall. "In half an hour or so."

I leaped to my feet and headed for the door.

"So, what about your recovery plan? How do I know when?"

"I'll call you. Maybe."

"You'd better..." she shouted as I headed through her front door at a run.

Chapter Eight

I flew my flitter at top speed along the express airway before descending in tight circles over New London, staying just above the local traffic pattern while searching for Grub Street.

The NavComp said it was just beneath me, but the streets in this rundown neighborhood didn't have local guidance beacons, forcing me to stay on manual control. After a few orbits, I spotted the intersection of Grub and Worm streets, and dropped down to street level. Easing along, a few meters above the roadway, I turned a corner and there it was, a rundown building with a fresh, huge banner promoting the new shelter. I curbed-parked in front of the prefab building and walked over to wait near the entrance.

Minutes later, a line of gleaming black limo-flitters began descending in formation to hover in the middle of the grubby street, looking completely out-of-place in this poor neighborhood. Tellingly, none of them actually landed on the dirty street. A dozen of Gazrall's subordinates hopped out, including several hulking types who were obviously bodyguards, and then the old man appeared, looking frail and bent.

Vespyr had her arm wrapped around him as she weightlessly floated out the door, their feet hovering a few inches above the pavement. She looked radiant and inhumanly beautiful, the more so given the grubby surroundings, not to mention looking ridiculously

young next to Gazrall. If I didn't know better, I'd have chalked her up as being his granddaughter.

She wore the same expensive outfit she'd worn in my kitchen, but had added a scarf and braided her hair to project a more conservative look. But it was her face that got to me. She looked as if she was having the time of her life, giggling sexily as she hugged herself affectionately to Gazrall. Her eyes sparkled and her face was so beautifully animated that she appeared to be head-over-heels in love with him. Almost in awe of him.

Obviously, given the thoughts she's shared with me about Gazrall, she was a marvelous actress. My stomach knotted into a ball. This is what Companions did — making enormously wealthy men feel like gods. I tried to catch her eye as she passed, but she didn't as much as glance my way. She was Gazrall's Companion again, as he took the stage to introduce her.



A wave of jealousy washed over me. I had no right to feel betrayed, but I just felt hollow and lost when the two of them disappeared inside. The same sick feeling I'd felt after losing my first love, back when I was a very young man. A combination of genuine loss, self-pity, loneliness and jealousy. Not to mention anger. Every man who'd lost at love knew the feeling.

Yet I barely knew her.

I struggled to rationalize my raw feelings, telling myself that she was nothing more than a very high class escort. But that wasn't where my heart was. We'd had a connection. Something special. I told myself that was just her pheromones and the great sex talking, but my heart didn't believe it. I'd had great sex in my life and I'd never felt like this afterward.

I was utterly miserable and starting to shiver from the cold by the time I finally turned to walk away. I kicked despondently at one of the announcements that lay on the pavement, only to have it flip over to proudly proclaim:

"Vespyr Tal'esta-Gazrall of Velor" will be giving the keynote address today:

A Celebration of Female Empowerment.

How the hell did Gazrall have the guts to bring his Companion into a place like this and try to talk to poor people about empowerment? He and his corporations were was the reason they were poor to begin with. And with Vespyr giving the speech? She'd been born overflowing with power and potential and inhuman beauty, a woman able to influence the future of entire planets, but she'd squandered it all away living as some rich man's toy. All to improve the fortunes of people back on Velor that she would never see again.

Still, a part of me wanted to walk inside and listen to her pitiful speech, if only to see her again. But I couldn't shake the image of Gazrall wrapping his skeleton-like arm lecherously around her waist. Replaying the last minutes in my head, I saw again the way Gazrall's eyes had narrowed as we passed, and he'd held Vespyr even closer. Then, while walking away, his hand had drifted down over her ass. I had dismissed that as a

simple slip at the time, the struggles of an old and frail man, but now I realized he'd been sending me a very direct message. A message about possession.

My heart froze in mid-beat. That could only mean one thing: Vespyr had told him about us.

My aching hollowness and misplaced jealousy was suddenly replaced by seething anger, my thoughts darkening. She was still Gazrall's girl. Always had been. They were both working me.

I ran back to my flitter, zoomed straight up out of the traffic lanes to blast along at top speed all the way back to my apartment, anger boiling over so badly that I had to put the flitter on Auto, my hands shaking. My mind churned blackly as I envisioned how much she'd told Gazrall. Probably everything given her vow of honesty. My flitter banged to a stop against the curb. I just sat there for a long moment, fists clenched and ready to fight someone. Anyone. I had to control my Aurean anger before I stepped out. Had to, even if everything in my life was going to shit. Had to protect my secret.

I was still struggling to get myself under control when another flitter descended to park across the street. Jana stepped out and started to walk toward me, only to freeze as she jerked her eyes upward to stare at something in the sky. I leaned forward to follow her gaze upward, only to have something slam down on the hood of my flitter, crushing it, the impact tossing my face into the windscreen. I blinked away tears of pain to see a pair of long, bare legs half buried in my crushed hood.

Very shapely legs. Fantastically fit. Golden skin.

Looking up, I found myself staring under the very short hem of Vespyr's blue skirt, inescapably aware that she wasn't wearing undergarments. She looked strangely prepubescent, which was shockingly ironic given Velorian reputations for sexual excess. Not to mention what we'd done together.

The surge of jealousy and anger returned — she wore this sexy outfit for Gazrall, not for me. Still, my heart reached out for her, my anger and jealousy evaporating as fast

as they formed, overwhelmed by what felt like love. An emotion I had no right to feel after knowing her so briefly.

I stared open-mouthed as she leaned down to press her face against the windscreen. I remembered her standing with her legs straight and her head between her ankles as I stood behind and made love to her. Without a doubt the most flexible woman I'd ever known.

“Are you ready to have a civilized discussion now, Kevin. Now that you've seen what a hell my other life is?”

I shook away my daydream as I fumbled around to shut down the damaged anti-grav. The door creaked as I opened it, almost jamming. She'd ruined my flitter, but my heart was soaring. I wanted so much to be angry, but instead I felt like a gushing teenager with his first girlfriend.

“Your... other life?” I managed to mutter as I stepped out.

Vespyr slowly tore her bare legs from the holes she'd smashed in my crumpled hood, one shoe dangling by her toe. She did a slow somersault over my head while fastening that shoe before settling gracefully on the sidewalk.

Her bright blue eyes looked levelly into mine.

I hadn't seen any reporters at the women's shelter — just a couple of picture-takers who'd arrived with the Gazrall entourage. Proof of his influence over the media. He was going to use his own “reporters” to reveal the “breaking news.” By tonight, everyone on Tazzi would be reacquainted with Gazrall's missing Companion.

I couldn't afford to have her seen, let alone recorded with me. Rumors were one thing, but I couldn't leave evidence around. I hugged her to my side as I turned to walk the other way while draping my coat over her.

Thankfully Jana saw it too. She raced over to my smoking flitter while stripping off her coat to reveal a red workout outfit beneath, her fantastic musculature in full view. She grabbed the front of my flitter with her left hand and lifted it high. Turning to mug for the cameras, she drew every eye.

Then, when she had everyone's rapt attention, she walked her hands down the vehicle until she'd pushed it up to balance on its rear fender. Then she tilted it over her back and staggered across the street with nearly two tons of flitter on her back. Everyone was staring wide-eyed at her now.

"What the... she's never been that strong," I gasped.

"Told you my pheromones work on her," Vespyr shrugged. "As I mentioned, they do more than just turn people on."

I heard a crash as she jammed the front of my flitter into an oversized garbage container and then turned around to brush her hands off. People were converging on her, Comms in hand and vidcams pointed at her. People didn't see hyper-muscular Zetans very often on Tazzi, least of a woman so phenomenally tall, dwarfing every man in sight.

We stood in the shadows as Vespyr wrapped her arm around my waist to hold me tightly. "She really is quite beautiful, isn't she?" she asked. "The ultimate limit of human physical ability."

I didn't like her going on about Jana, just to put me off. "That was quite an act at the Shelter," I said.

"I was working then. Gazrall demands my complete loyalty and focus when I'm with him. It's my sworn duty."

"So you can just turn it on and off like that?" I said, snapping my fingers.

"Yes, I can," she said, a hint of anger in her voice too. "What I do with Gazrall is none of your business, Kevin."

"That old fart parades you around like his prize mare, Vespyr. And I'm convinced he knew who I was when he walked past me. Did you talk to him about us?"

"He can do with me as he wishes. That's his legal privilege. And yes, I had to tell him about you."

"I am obligated..." Vespyr said weakly.

“He insisted on knowing everything,” Vespyr continued. “He told me was happy I’d found someone who had... the proper abilities. Endurance.”

Despite the crazy mix of anger and loss and longing that churned inside me, one part of me was wickedly proud. Gazrall had his billions, and he’d spent part of his fortune to get a bedmate who would inspire him. The ultimate woman. Yet now he was a dickless old man. Vespyr had come to me for comfort. She’d thrilled to my half alien skills in bed. And she’d done that despite the risks of violating her contract.

I couldn’t take my eyes from her as she smiled so happily. She undid the clasps at the end of her braids and tossed her head to loosen her hair, letting the long strands of sparkling gold fall across her shoulders. Her hair looked as if it had just been brushed a hundred strokes. Even her hair was superhuman.

I struggled to hang onto reality.

“But this is still all about the GAR, isn’t it?”

Vespyr’s eyes grew softer. “That’s how it started, Kevin, but it’s more than that now,” she said softly. “You feel that as strongly as I do.”

My heart soared, even as the Aurean part of me remained unconvinced. Always doubting. “A loophole in your contract?”

“Like I said earlier,” Vespyr continued, “Gazrall has agreed to allow me some discretion. I claimed my relationship with you is Velorian business, which is permitted under extreme circumstances. But yes, at its core, this is still about the GAR, no matter how else I might feel. Or how much I enjoy being with you. Which I truly do.”

My hopes surged and then fell, even as my ego soared, anger and something like love intermingling, confusing emotions, twisting me in knots. I felt miserable and thrilled at the same time. This Velorian total honesty thing wasn’t all it was cracked up to be.

“Well, so much for celebrating your own empowerment today, Vespyr. Did those people back there actually buy into a speech given by a virtual slave?”

“I said not to call me that,” Vespyr said as she stiffened. “Ever.” Her eyes blazed with blue light as she glared at me. “So, are you in or out? You know the GAR is vitally important to me.”

I took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly. She had me, and not just by the balls. I couldn't let go of the GAR. Not after I'd failed to find a defense for it. “Of course I'm in, Vespyr. We're saving lives. Tazzian and Velorian.”

Her face brightened into a dazzling smile, her eyes flashing happily as she hooked her arm through mine. My darker side wondered if this smile was brighter than the fake one she wore around Gazrall. Somehow she managed to look so young and innocent again. She had so many looks. Like a chameleon.

“Strangely, innocence works for you, Vespyr. Yet you are the least innocent person I know.”

Chapter Nine

Jana stayed outside to pose for the vidcams while I ushered Vespyr inside my apartment and away from the gawking crowd. She pulled a tightly compressed fur coat from the pack she was carrying and shook it out with a loud snap. It was huge, with an oversized hood and long enough to reach the floor.

“This is the best I've got for keeping you warm while flying. Cheraz furs are very aerodynamic. The hairs are hollow and shaped like little airfoils.”

“Furs?” I said sourly. “Why can't we just borrow someone's flitter?”

“Two reasons: it's slow and it's trackable. I'm neither.”

I felt a bit sick to my stomach as she handed me the dead skins. I'd always opposed killing animals for their fur, especially the rare, indigenous Cheraz. A flying squirrel the size of a large wolf, they leaped off thousand foot cliffs to soar down to land on sheep-sized prey, their coat and the loose skin between outstretched legs formed an airfoil. Then I thought of Vespyr snuggling up with me inside a flying wolf squirrel skin, flying in ways

that the original owner of this skin would have envied. If not for the deadly urgency of our task, that would have been funny.

She took my hand and led the way up the stairs and out onto the back of the roof. No one was visible in alleyway below. I wrapped the huge fur around both of us, my arms closing around her chest below her breasts.

A siren was approaching in the distance. I saw the bright flashes of police flitters approaching.

“Jana can handle them,” Vespyr said. “We need to get out of here.”

Despite the long drop in front of us, my usual fear of heights had vanished. Flying for her was as natural as dancing was to me. I felt her body tense slightly, and we floated off into empty space. I held on with all my strength as her body stiffened further, and we suddenly soared upward at tremendous speed.

Amazingly, the sensations of free flight were exactly as they had been in my many dreams. The difference was that I found it hard to take a breath in the violent slipstream. Unlike my dreams, where the air had always been silent, the violent flapping of the robe grew very loud. I made some adjustments with my hood as I found a way to angle my head just right to keep a low velocity bubble of air in front of my mouth. It wasn't easy, but I could breathe again.

We quickly left the city, flying high over the Tazzian farms and fields that spread outward for dozens of miles in every direction, the view even more breathtaking than when seen from inside the dome of a flitter. Thankfully the thinner air at our altitude reduced the force of the slipstream so she could fly faster.

“You OK?” she asked, her lips touching the fur over my ear to overcome the roar of the slipstream.

I nodded vigorously, as best I could in the slipstream.

“Then I'm going to go faster. Squeeze me harder if you have a problem.”

Between the unfettered view below and the way my arms were wrapped so warmly around her, I had an angel's view of heaven. I'd spent the night loving her and now I was flying with her. I never wanted to set foot back on the ground.

Too soon, the supposedly abandoned but actually converted air base that was our destination appeared on the horizon. The reality of our desperate mission crashed back in on me as Vespvr said something about "going tactical."

Before her words registered, she flipped over on her back and dove straight for the ground, accelerating. I gave up even trying to breathe as I stared wide-eyed at the up-rushing ground, my heart leaping from my chest. Then, just before we hit, Vespvr pulled out, my body crushing against her back, the crushing G force dimming my vision as my lungs emptied, my chest compressing against her hard body. She was easily pulling 15, maybe 20 G's. More than a natural human could have withstood.

The G's magically disappeared and my vision came back, eyes opening wide now as I found my nose skimming along less than a foot from the ground. Everything was a blur except a tiny fixed spot directly in front of our travel. The slipstream roared in my ears as she twisted left and right, barely avoiding trees and buildings, ducking under power lines, barely clearing the cargo trucks traveling along a busy road.

We quickly left them behind. A few minutes later we were *there*.

My heart was in my throat as she skimmed over the outer security emplacements of the compound and the air around us lit up from the defensive lasers. Angry red beams criss-crossed the air, each of them flaring as brightly as an arc welder as they ionized the air.

Vespvr dodged them as she aimed her own heat vision at the surveillance cameras and targeting sensors. They exploded into molten metal and glass a half second before she braked to a high-G stop, my body crushed against the unyielding steel over hers again. It was suddenly quiet, and the base looked only forlorn instead of forbidding.



“So what do we do now?” she asked.

“I thought you knew how to get in?”

“Not without activating more self defense bots. I can’t keep you safe in a cross-fire.”

I struggled to remember the defensive layout of the building.

“Well... ah, based on my earlier trips, they won’t keep any live guards here. Just the bots. But they can send an armed response in ten, maybe fifteen minutes.”

“And the GAR?”

“It’s just inside that first hangar, over there on the right.”

I pointed to it, as if that were necessary.

“In a purpose-built vault. You’d better hurry.”

“We have time. They won’t send a response team.”

“*Why not?*” I fairly shouted. I’d seen heavily armored security teams at work. Scary. They’d start firing before their flitters even landed. Shoot first and ask questions later.

“Gazrall clamped down on the Armory after that business with the warship. I told him nothing about our plans, but he’s not stupid. He’s confident we’ll succeed in test firing the GAR and sorting out its secrets. He *wanted* me to get in, and he knows about my capabilities. So he had his people take down all the security feeds.”

“I didn’t think he was involved,” I said darkly. “Let alone that he knew I’d come along for the ride.”

“He’s involved in everything, Kevin. He’s betting on you to lead us through the reverse engineering and production phase.”

“But— I thought...” I said, confused now. “I’m working on a shield, not making more of these monstrosities.”

“That’s the only thing he *doesn’t* know. Gazrall has always used his power and wealth, Kevin. More than anything he lusts for greater power. He wants to steal a march on the Scalantrans by replicating the GAR and selling it to other worlds. That will make him the wealthiest man in the universe, or so he thinks. And I’ve encouraged him to keep thinking that way.”

“So the Armory’s going to ignore what we’re doing?”

“The Armory won’t *know* what we’re doing, any more than he will. Not until we’re long gone. And then they won’t have any choice but to go along with Gazrall — but it will be too late. He’s the only one we have to worry about.”

I didn’t like that at all, not knowing the limits of Vespvr’s loyalty to Tazzi’s best interests as well as Velor’s. Or to myself. But having the GAR controlled by the Armory was no better. My only choice was to trust Vespvr.

“So all the external defenses are down. By the way, that was obviously combat flying. I can only imagine how fast you’d move if you weren’t carrying me.”

“Part of my training back on Erin’lah involved combat skills. My best subject as it turns out.”

“Then why don’t you guys become full-time warriors?”

“We’re not about to hire ourselves out as mercenaries — not with our abilities. The Companion program earns foreign exchange without the risk of our being viewed as hired guns. And nobody worries about a bunch of concubines or whatever they think of us.”

“Yet you and a few of your sisters could probably protect an entire planet.” Or destroy it, I thought.

“Assuming this new Aurean weapon doesn’t level the playing field first.”

I pointed at hangar. “Just so you know, that place is supposed to be impossible to break into, even with explosives. You could run a tank into it.”

“Fortunately, I brought my keys. Ten to be exact.” She wiggled her fingers.

“Oh Lordy...” I breathed.

“I’m going to hang you over there for a moment.”

She tore some metal strips off a parked flitter and tied them around me, then hung me on a light pole. I felt like a turkey, trussed up and waiting for the oven.

Vespyr flexed her fingers as she floated down to walk up to the door, examining it briefly. Then she stiffened her hands into two blades and slowly practiced her aim at the crack around the doorframe a couple of times.

When she finally smashed her fingertips into the gap, the shockwave felt like a cannon shot, flattening my clothing against my chest despite being fifty feet away. She slammed her fingers into the doorframe a second time, then a third, the shockwaves from each blow so strong they almost stopped my heart, the muted ring of steel against steel filled the courtyard.

A small port opened just above the door and a high-power military laser blasted her, sparks flying in all directions as her clothing turned to ash. She backed up to place her hands on her hips, then rose to hover directly in front of the laser, absorbing the massive blasts it fired into her chest.

“What are you doing...” I shouted.

“Letting it... deplete... energy banks,” she gasped, the superheated air from her lungs making her voice shrill.

The lethal beam blasted her another three times before sputtering out. Her smoking skirt was all that remained of her clothing as she jammed her fingers back into the cracks she'd already made, and then began wiggling them, working deeper into the steel. Her bared back turned into an amazing display of power as she pressed inward, muscles turning into a harder kind of steel.

The yard-thick door screamed as she slowly bent it inward, buckling the sides to create an opening. She jammed her arm and then her shoulder into the gap and twisted mightily, the hinges and locking bars exploding outward, bits and pieces of shattered steel pinging and clanging loudly across the concrete. She wrapped her arms around the mangled multi-ton door and tore it complete free of its frame. Then, with a powerful toss, she sent it flying over the security fence. It hit with earthquake force a few seconds later.

Before I could fully digest her awesome display of raw strength, she flew up to wrap her arm around me to fly us both through the now open doorway. Her eyes flashed arc-welder bright as she vaporized additional cameras and sensors inside, the brilliance of her heat vision briefly blinding me.

“Down the hallway to the right,” I pointed, barely able to see through the dark spots in my vision. “We’re looking for the Ultra High Energy Lab.”

We flew down a couple of hallways until she found the door. I clung to her back to avoid the floor sensors as she repeated the same trick with the much thinner lab door. This time I could feel all those marvelous muscles at work. It was one thing to read about such power, but another to feel it working under my hands.

Seconds later, we were inside. I showed her the GAR vault and she promptly tore that apart as well, the steel looking like wet clay in her hands. She returned with the ugly device clutched to her left side as she wrapped her right arm around me and started to rise.

“Wait... I need some other gear.”

I slipped from her grasp to grab the protective suit we'd developed and the small shield generator that powered it, hugging them as she hugged me again.

"Got it all. Let's get out of here."

Everything turned to a blur again as Vespyr flew through the doorway and down the hallways at fantastic speed. We flew out the doorway like a bullet from a rifle, then climbing like a missile. Her fingers dug painfully into my flesh, and breathing was hopeless again, but fortunately she was able to quickly duck low behind a hill and slow down. We were out of range and below line-of-sight from the Armory now.

"Over to right," I gasped. "Test range... is on the shore... Varan Sea. Less than fifty miles."

I struggled mightily to breathe during the minutes it took us to reach the shore, but didn't see anything that looked like a test range. Vespyr flew to the north just inside the surf line. After a few minutes, she reversed course, and flew south of our original intersection with the shore. A half dozen firing ranges came into view just inside some low dunes.

Vespyr swooped down to tear open the rather flimsy door of the control building, all the while rubbernecking as she searched the area with her tachyon vision, looking for sensors or mines or any other kind of defensive device. Her eyes flashed a half dozen times before she set me down to go off to explore the rest of the area. She flew around so fast that I could see the little vortexes in her wake, her sharp sonic booms assaulting my ears as more bright flashes killed the remaining defense bots.

While she was sanitizing the area, I activated the GAR's self-test, which it thankfully passed — there was no way to fix it here. Satisfied, I turned around to see Vespyr appear in front of me as if by magic, the blast of air from her arrival nearly knocking me over. She walked over to lean over a low concrete wall to study the beach, all of her clothing blasted away now.

My heart skipped as I couldn't resist staring at those long legs and her perfect backside, her hair delightfully tangled to give her a wild look. She strangely appeared both

fragile and disconcertingly young, yet possessed of a beauty so intense it almost hurt to look at her. A misplaced wave of disgust came over me. What the hell was Velor doing selling off girls this young? Or selling them at all!

“The range backstop is barely four meters thick,” she said over her shoulder, interrupting my mental rant. “But the lower part is ablative, which is good. Biggest problem is likely to be the ground. It’s just reinforced concrete and granite.”

“Just?”

“They’ll both melt at the temperatures I’m expecting.”

I shook my head. “God, I still can’t believe we’re going to do this,” I blurted.

“Just focus on the tech,” she said. “Your instincts and feelings are all going to be wrong, given they are based on human norms. I know what I’m doing.”

“Do you? You’ve never even seen a GAR before. You couldn’t operate it if I wasn’t here. And you’re still human. Just a different subspecies.”

She flew back over to land beside me, acting as if nudity was the most natural thing in the world. “Then show me how to work it.”

I thrilled to the warmth of her skin against mine. The way her breasts rose and fell with each breath. I had to close my eyes for a moment to focus my thoughts, to slow my visceral reaction to her presence.

When I opened them, I calmly took her through the various buttons and controls, describing when and how to use each one. Inside I was struggling to get my arms around the image of her beauty and femininity facing down the lethal, obscenity of this energy weapon. That they had some kind of connection.

“I still find it incomprehensible that you think this abomination is powered by the same energy as yourself.”

She abruptly set the weapon down. “I’m certain now,” she said crisply. “I can feel it. Here.” She cupped her breasts. “Please make it ready.”

There was nothing sexy about her mood now. Was she pretending to be unafraid? I'd been working so hard to push my fears away that I hadn't considered hers. I hadn't looked beneath the bravado to see the girl.

"There must be another way, Vespyr."

"Just power it up."

Fears or not, she was determined. So much for being merely a plaything of a rich man, a Companion who warmed an old man's bed. This was a woman of determination and courage. Humbled, I pulled on my shield suit and warmed up the shield generator. Once it was humming, I started charging the GAR. The low whine of the circuitry soon rose in intensity and frequency.

Overwhelmed by the sound, I briefly imagined this was nothing but a slow-motion dream. But when I looked up, my heart melted as I saw her standing at the end of the range. I couldn't give in to that. I was a scientist. This was science.

A portion of my long practiced objectivity returned. I thought of her worries again as I activated the intercom. "Ah... just for the record, Vespyr, you don't look much like target material. Too skinny."

She didn't reply to my lame attempt at humor, so I glanced down at the gauges. The charging meter was edging toward 100%.

"So, is phenomenal beauty a requirement on Velor for becoming a Companion?"

A small smile found her. She rested her hands on her hips and thrust out her chest. "Obviously not, given my freckles and these small boobs. Imperfections back home. But Terrans seem to like me just the same."

I found myself gawking again. I'd never seen a woman with half her beauty, nor a slender woman so wrapped in smooth muscle, her body impossibly tight. The freckles were merely cute, and she had the best boobs I'd ever seen.

She saw the look on my face and continued. "Just so you know, I was considered below average back home. I wouldn't have made it through my training if my brothers

hadn't taught me how to fight. I maxed out that part of the test program and squeaked by despite my flaws."

"You've got to be kidding. You? Below average?"

"Skietra's honest truth. I'm ugly."

My mouth went dry as I stared at the way her skin glowed so golden in the sunlight.

"I doubt my heart could handle the sight of anyone prettier than you. Good thing I'm not planning to visit Velor."

She smiled, both of us trying to pretend we weren't nervous. "Good. You might find it hard to walk around in a 6G gravity well, let alone do anything more athletic."

"Damn... so much for my fantasy of meeting a truly beautiful woman."

She sighed. "Thanks for trying to cheer me up. Pretty lame, but it worked. Are you ready now?"

I nodded as my stomach knotted. "Yeah..."

I watched as she shifted her feet nervously, trying to decide how to stand. She wound up leaning against the wall, still undecided about what to do with her hands. She finally spread her legs slightly and rested her fists on her hips and stood very tall as she faced up range.

"A truly heroic pose," I quipped.

The feeling of unreality I'd been struggling against grew stronger as I turned my shield generator all the way up. The horrific images of my earlier test shots kept coming back to haunt me. I wasn't really doing this, was I? Shooting at this lovely girl? A girl I was falling for.

"Don't worry," she said, seeing the conflict on my face. "Cute, slender, female and blonde doesn't equate to 'indestructible, hardcore fighting machine' in your mind. Especially when I've got a job like mine... you know. But I really am."

I shook my head, unable to process it all.

“You’ve already seen my strength, Kevin. And those combat lasers didn’t hurt me, did they?”

“They’re nothing compared to...”

“This is my decision, Kevin. Nobody will even know you were here.”

“I’ll hate myself forever if I hurt you.”

“This is going to happen, with or without you. I want to do it with you.”

Damn... everything she said sounded sexy.

“Start with the two-second burst,” she continued.

“Start?”

“If that doesn’t hurt too much, we’ll keep going until it does.”

“You’ve got to be fucking insane!” I screamed.

“I’m the only sane one here right now, Kevin. Focus on the science.”

I felt the blood rushing to my head as confusing emotions hit me from every side. She had one thing right: I had to be insane to shoot this thing at her. Not to mention stealing a Most Top Secret weapon in the first place. But what could I do? She was determined. The disgusting thought of Hendrickson standing in my shoes made my teeth grind. Would she seduce him too? Undoubtedly.

I raised the heavy weapon, calling on all my willpower to keep my arms and legs from shaking — if I fucked this up, if I missed her, that backstop wasn’t going to slow the beam down. It would blow through it and hit the beach. Nobody should be walking there, but you never knew.

I shifted my body sideways to minimize my exposure to the expected heat while keeping my gloved arm as far from my body as I could. Even with the GAR suspended from the ceiling, it was difficult to get the sight picture to settle down.

“Aim at my chest, Kevin,” she reminded me.

I did, settling the crosshairs between her breasts as I pulled the trigger to the first position. That engaged the anti-grav stability system, freezing the weapon on target. The weapon supported its own weight now. It would track Vespyr's movements to keep the aim point exactly on target.

She was making it easy by not breathing.

I gritted my teeth and counted down, trying not to think. Not to feel anything. I was a scientist. The data I was about to gather was vital.

"OK... I'm firing in 5,4,3..."

The numbers rolled off my tongue, leaving me feeling as if I was lost in my dream, now a nightmare. The kind you can't wake up from. I clenched my teeth so tightly I nearly broke them as I grunted: "2... 1... zero!"

Chapter Ten

The painful electric shock of the firing impulse blasted through me the same way it had back on the Armory's range as the force field flared brightly around me. Sparks flew from my hands to the weapon and then back to my suit, each one sending a needle of pain through my body.

But that was nothing compared to the nuclear-bright burst of coherent energy that shot down the range to envelop Vespyr. The surface oils and moisture from her skin exploded into sparks as the beam tried to bore through her like it had with everything else we'd tried it on.

I heard Vespyr scream, the sound tearing through my body as surely as the GAR itself could!

Terrified, I struggled to turn the weapon away from her or stop the firing, but it was locked on target. My heavy goggles revealed that she was enveloped in that same angry, white-hot glow I'd seen during the other tests.

As with the earlier targets, the edges of her body began to blur as they pulsed with bluish heat, and then she disappeared inside that horrific ball of starlight. The very atoms of the previous targets had been dissociated into nothingness.

My heart froze as I the same thing was happening to Vespyr, and then the beam and the stabilizer turned off and the full weight of the weapon returned to swing on its overhead cable. The GAR began recharging, giving off another ear-splitting whine.

The heat shield in front of me had started to melt despite my being a hundred feet from Vespyr, the heat so intense that I had to retreat to the far wall of the firing range. Unlike the previous tests where the target merely vanished, the glowing center of this burst was still there, intact and star-bright.

Bolts of blue-white electricity flashing continuously from all directions to strike the blinding glow that was hopefully still Vespyr. Gradually, the light seemed to swirl around her in a dazzling display. And then I saw something I hadn't seen in the earlier tests: a flicker at the top of the fireball. That flicker became a lock of fluttering hair, and then more strands. Her long hair was billowing upward from the fireball — seemingly on fire and filled with sparks. And then, wonder of wonders, the glow started to fade to reveal the faint outline of her glowing body.

She looked smaller because she was kneeling in molten concrete, arms crossed tightly across her chest. Slowly the glow faded as she absorbed the heat until her hair fluttered and fall back across her shoulders and down her body. Her chest had taken on a shimmer, almost like liquid metal. She lifted her head to look at me, and her eyes glowed like blue lasers. Startlingly, when she opened her arms, blinding flashes of green energy began arcing between the little thumbs that were her nipples.

She opened her mouth to speak, but the air that came out was so hot and thin that her voice was an unintelligible scream. Frustrated, she glanced meaningfully toward the weapon and then held up three fingers.

“A three-second burst?” I shouted. My ears were still ringing from the blasts of thunder.

She nodded.

I shook my head violently. If I killed her, I'd carry the shame and guilt for the rest of my life — assuming Gazrall didn't have me executed as soon as he saw what had happened to his priceless Companion.

Vespyr stamped her foot impatiently, splashing molten concrete all over her legs, and waved those three fingers again.

I had no choice. She was determined, even if it killed her. Damn her! Why was she making me do this?

Anger made it easier to aim the weapon a second time. She wasn't giving me a real choice. I set the firing time for three seconds and closed my eyes as I pulled the trigger, my brain numb.

The second firing was as shocking and painful as the first; worse for the longer firing time. Despite dark glasses and closed eyelids, I was still dazzled. Long seconds passed before I could see again, and when I did, she was kneeling in a pool of molten concrete. Her skin had an even more pronounced metallic sheen to it now, and bolts of bluish electricity sparkled all around her body this time, enveloping her entirely in what had to be raw Orgone.

Her eyes flashed like blue arc welders as she looked my way. She was holding out five fingers. She was literally swimming in molten concrete and steel now as the heat of her body melted more of everything around her. The entire end of the test range, ferro-concrete, rock and steel was starting to slump like an ice cream cone under a hot summer sun.

This time the metallic sheen of her skin didn't fade. Even worse, patches of black began to appear as well, looking much like third-degree burns. Horrible. I wished I could be struck blind then and there. She going to emerge burned and scarred and in horrible pain. And it was all my fault.

And then, just as my despair overwhelmed me, I saw a change in her. The largest of the burns began to shrink and soon disappeared entirely. I stared, blinking, unable to

comprehend what I was seeing. All the other burns faded as well, her body healing faster and faster.

I sensed she'd come very close to the edge. Her body had nearly succumbed and then recovered. I wasn't going to push her further. I was done.

I powered down the GAR. She could go to Hendrickson or anyone else for help, but there was no way I was going to grant her the five-second burst she was insisting. She rose unsteadily to her feet and approached me, still holding up those five fingers, anger in her face. I couldn't pull my eyes from the angry red glow between her thighs and the glow of her breasts. She'd been burning Orgone at a furious rate.

She waved her hand insistently at me. Five fingers.

I shook my head and moved to stand in front of the GAR. "You barely recovered from that last shot, Vespyr. I'm done shooting this thing."

Her eyes flared like arc welders and the beams grazed my shoulder to melt the wall behind me.

I stood my ground. "You can kill me if you want," I shouted at her, "but I'm not going to let you go through this again, no matter what."

She saw the determination on my face, and dropped to the concrete floor, head dropping into her lap. Her hair was strangely lighter and her skin was darker than before. Disturbingly, her breasts were also larger, sitting high and nearly perfectly round on her strong chest. She'd absorbed a portion of the incredible heat. Heat that continued to radiate with such force that I could only bear it from behind my shield.

"Are you all right!" I shouted around the shield.

"Skietra... that thing..." she gasped while struggling to swallow. "I need... to... something... drink."

Her voice was high and shrill as she stumbled over her words, her lips sticking together.

Still, a wave of relief washed over me as I heard her speak. I turned to run back into the building, ducking low under the portion of the wall that glowed an angry red from her heat vision blast. I filled an old cup with water from a rusted faucet, and then ran back to hand it to her while wearing a long welder's glove. Reaching out at arm's length from behind a portable shield. She heat singed my arm right through the heavy glove.

She drank the water, which of course turned to steam as fast as she tried to swallow it. I rushed to get another cup, and then thought better of it, bringing her a bucket full instead. She downed that just as quickly given it mostly turned to steam as well. I brought another, and another. Then more. She drank some of each bucket and then dumped the rest over her head, filling the room with steam. It took more than twenty buckets before she was able to talk clearly.

"My blood was boiling in my veins for a bit there," she whispered as she wet her dry lips, her voice still high and faint. "And my heart was racing when it couldn't find anything to pump but steam. That made me so weak I couldn't stand."

I was astounded. "Blood boiling?"

"You saw my skin turning to that metallic sheen. I was taught that's how our skin looks when the binding matrix of our cells starts to break down. But usually only when we fly too close to a star's corona."

"I saw some black spots too. Looked like third-degree burns," I added, not sure where this was going.

She blanched. "Then it was even worse than I thought. Another burst would have killed me. Thank you for stopping. I was kind of... out of it, I guess."

I smiled. "That's what friends are for. But you're all right now?"

She started to nod and then paused. "I think I will be after I process the last bit of heat into Orgone. Orgone synthesis thingies are overloaded."

She lifted her hands to massage her breasts, and the glow beneath her hands began to slowly fade. She lowered her hands to her hips as she faced me, her confidence

returning as fast as her normal skin tone. She looked the same as before. Well, other than being at least two cup sizes larger.

She smiled as she saw where I was looking and cupped herself firmly, winking sexily at me. “The more Orgone I carry, the larger they get. Wait until next time...”

“Stop it!” I shouted angrily. “This isn’t a joke. And it damn well isn’t sexy. There isn’t going to be a next time.”

“But after what you’ve been through...”

“What I’ve been through? I could have killed you. You should be dead right now. Should be vaporized.”

“Do I look dead?”

Anything but. If anything, better than before. Orgone obviously did her good.

“Remember that I insisted, Kevin. I was prepared for it. At least I thought I was. But you weren’t. And which is worse — to be dead, or think of yourself as a murderer? And now you think you came close to becoming one. But forget about that. Think about how I look now. My hair this light. My figure this dramatic. My body runs on the stuff that weapon shoots.”

“I’m sure Gazrall will be mightily impressed when you return to him,” I snapped sarcastically.

She glared at me, eyes burning, her inflated breasts rising higher as she took a deep breath. “Gazrall doesn’t fucking matter any more. He never did, except in his own eyes, and in my vows as a Companion. I have a higher duty now. I must get to Velor as soon as possible. The High Council must hear of this. The Senate too.”

I sat down hard as the consequences of her words hit me.

“But how can you do that without returning to Velor?”

“How indeed? But there’s something I haven’t told you. I had word from Velor on the last Scalantran ship. Word that made it more urgent for me to take the risk I have just

taken. I'll have to show you... back at the apartment. So, let me fly you back home. I need some sleep, and yours is the only place I feel safe now."

"Of course."

Chapter Eleven

Vespyr got her well-earned rest, and the next morning she showed me the messages from Velor.

They had arrived on two delicate pieces of foil encased inside an allotropic diamond crystal the size of a chicken's egg -- a security system aimed at keeping anyone but Companions from accessing messages from the High Council.

"They must have told me about that during her training but I somehow missed the part about how to open them," she confessed. "I didn't figure it out until after I met you."

Raw strength turned out to be the key — a key to which only a Supremis had access. She'd twisted both ends in opposite directions with every ounce of her strength while smacking the crystal very hard on her knee. The highly stressed crystal had shattered into microscopic fragments while freeing the foils.

I couldn't read Velorian, but she told me that the first message -- which carried the FlameBird seal -- was a general advisory from the High Council of an Exploratory Investigation: all Companions were to stand alert for any reports of new weapons being deployed by the Aureans and inform the Council without delay.

The second message bore no seal. That was surprising. It was a transcript of the testimony of another Companion, Ju'lette, and a Tanzrobian named Zanele. The gist of it was that the Aureans, in a ruse to cover their invasion of the seeded world Ju'lette had lived on, had attacked the Scalantran ship *Far Wanderer* in uncontested space and taken it over for a time. That alone had been enough to convince Ju'lette to carry a warning to Velor. But then she'd learned on Andros that the Aureans had moved in on the Galen-seeded world of the Azizi.

I didn't know any of the places or names she mentioned, but the message was clear. The Aureans were aggressively on the move.

She continued. “If I can believe all I’ve read, the Aureans would have surely destroyed the *Spirit of Youth*, another Scalantran ship, on its next visit to Tanzrobi, had not a party of Azizi escaped the planet aboard a stolen yacht in time to warn that ship. Two of the Azizi, it turns out, headed to Velor with Ju’lette on the *Far Wanderer*.”

I shook my head. I’d never heard of Tanzrobi or Andros, let alone the Azizi. “And this relates to us, to Tazzi, in what way?”

“The way I read it, Kevin, the Aureans are going on the offensive. Clearly that’s what Ju’lette believed and claims to have observed. Unfortunately, it doesn’t appear that her testimony was well received by the majority of the Council. I think that’s why some dissident Scribe or faction on the Council slipped this second message into the crystal — to let all Companions read the account and make their own decisions.”

“Well, one thing is clear,” I added. “The Scalantrons are both alarmed and hungry for trade in the GARs. From everything I know, no one has ever attacked their ships before; they’re scrupulous about not playing favorites. Legendary neutrality and all. They’ve worked hard to stay out of the way of the Aureans since the First Strike.”

She paused, tilting her head, thinking. “Or maybe that’s all it is. Maybe the Aureans just have long memories and are looking for revenge. Or is this the beginning of a campaign to conquer vulnerable star systems? The Empire has been growing stronger by the year. And the Scalantrons, who are neutral as you say, are not above playing the role of arms merchant, supplying weapons to anyone with enough money. Even the Aureans if they needed more production capacity, although they don’t have any regular trading relationship with the Empire that I’ve heard about. Maybe they’d rather feed the hungry bear to pacify him than try to match its teeth and claws.”

I shrugged. “Hell if I know. But whatever they’re doing, the Scalantrons have to find a way to ensure their continued freedom of travel and trade, despite their obvious hard feelings at losing some of their people to the Aurean attacks.”

“Velor needs to take this far more seriously,” Vespvr said with a disgusted shake of her blonde head. “We Companions are the cross-hairs. They certainly don’t need the GAR to conquer human colonies — this is a purely anti-Supremis weapon. And instead of the Council sticking their head in the sand, labeling this merely as an “Exploratory

Investigation”, this should be a Red Alert with everyone scrambling to find a defense. It’s would take years, even decades, for them to gather responses from all Companions that way. And many of those responses will be far out-dated by the time they arrive.”

“No argument from me, Vespyr. But what can we do?”

She frowned while rolling the foil nervously around her fingers. “If the Aureans are preparing to hunt Companions like me, or anyone else who stands in the way of their imperial ambitions, perhaps even carrying the fight back to Velor, we need to prepare. We need to issue a bigger wakeup call. One even the Council can’t ignore.” An icy chill filled me as the implications of her claims hit home.

“A war between the Supremis? With weapons designed for your level of toughness and power? If so, a lot of humans are going to get caught in the crossfire. Entire worlds. It’s almost too horrible to believe.”

“But nothing else makes sense,” Vespyr said while standing up. “Why else create such a weapon.” She started to float back and forth, pacing in air, looking like a distraught angel. “At least now you understand my urgency. And now you know why I need you to find me a way of reaching Velor. There won’t be a ship leaving here for my homeworld for a year and a half.”

“Which means you’ll have to fly a wormhole,” I ventured.

“I knew you’d figure it out,” Vespyr smiled, suggesting she was aware that I was struggling with more than just the ship schedule.

I tore my eyes from her to resume studying the convoluted transit schedules for the nearby star systems. The Scalantran captains were punctual, to the day, but the various trade ships didn’t publish a combined schedule. Each ship was its own little world. I had to pull data from each ship and trading route to piece it together. It took a while.

She floated off to stare out the window, lost in her own thoughts.

“All right,” I declared an hour later. “I’ve found two Scalantran nearby port calls scheduled fairly soon near us... one is at Selene and the other at Madstop. Luckily for you, both ships calling there are eventually bound for Velor. The *Margin of Profit* out of Madstop and the *Boundless Opportunity* from Selene.”

“The Madstop arrival is over six months from now,” I replied as I forced myself to look down. “Selene’s is only four.”

“It has to be Selene,” Vespyr said determinedly, seemingly happy to finally have a direction.

“I don’t know. According to this, the wormhole between here and Selene is really hairy, Vespyr. Class 3, which means small and unstable. Barely capable of navigation, and even then, it only stabilizes for 8.4 hours out of 24.”

I looked up at her worriedly.

“Even worse, we don’t have access to any Scalantran data regarding the timing of stability events.”

Vespyr shrugged. “I’ll know what a stable period looks like when I see it.”

“But it will take you days to get up to dive speed,” I reminded her. “And you’ll be committed then. Plus at 0.5c, you aren’t going to get any decent visual imagery from the hole due to relativistic effects. How are you going to know when to hit it?”

“Odds are only one in three.” She shrugged again. “But far better odds than Velor will have if the Aureans show up with a boatload of GARs.”

“What you are really saying, Vespyr, is that you have two out of three chances of dying or winding up in another dimension or whatever. And even if you do hit it right, it still leaves you with the problem of getting a data cube through all that heat and gravity waves.”

“I’ve got to risk it,” she said. “As you said, any more of the GAR fire should have killed me. But I’m not sure any other Companion would have survived what I took. Perhaps I’m a bit tougher than the average Velorian. I always was growing up, anyway.”

“Won’t the data cube melt down in the wormhole? I’ve read something about the heat involved in wormhole transits — stellar grade.”

“I’ll memorize as much as I can. Encode it in mathematical algorithms that I can remember.”

I shook my head.

“Anyone who is going to build a defense against this thing will need the gigabytes of parametric and analysis data we’ve gathered. Trust me, I’ve tried to make a shield, but we lack the basic technology. I’m not sure even Velor has the technology.”

“Then I’ll have to give it to them... only, how am I going to get the GAR itself through a wormhole intact? Even if the casing and emitters survive, the control circuits are all made of optical trans-carbon chips, just like any electronics. The carbon will burn well below the temperatures I’m going to encounter.”

“I see only one possible way. You have to remove the GAR’s control chips and carry them, and the data chips, in a Vendorian steel tube — internally.”

Vespyr stared at me and then laughed. “Something only a man would think of. But yes, it should work. Presuming, of course, the tube isn’t much bigger than you are. We’ll have to measure to make sure.”

I refused to rise to her come-on. This was life and death.

“Even that’s an uneducated guess, Vespyr,” I added, trying to keep my head on straight. “We have no idea how hot it gets inside those wormholes, and I don’t know anything about the thermal conductivity through your flesh.”

“I’ve been near the corona of the sun many times, and I never got even close to the heat I felt with the GAR. Broad spectrum heat doesn’t seem to get inside me very fast.”

“Even then, we’ve got one in three chances of you surviving the first hole. And how many wormholes do you have to jump to get to Velor?”

She shrugged. “Only the first if I can catch one of those ships.”

“You ever heard of a Velorian flying a hole naked? Outside a ship, I mean.”

“Doesn’t mean it can’t be done. I know the basics of hole diving, same as you: speed between thirty and fifty percent of light speed, then use the tachyon beacons to guide by. Just fly down them to hit the apex of the funnel. If I can survive a GAR, I can survive a wormhole.”

“You don’t know that.”

“You don’t know that I can’t.”

I waved the wormhole analysis at her. “It says here that the opening to the smaller wormhole is just a few hundred yards wide and you’ll be moving at half the speed of light. You think that’s easy?”

Vespyr shrugged and then gave me her famous grin. It was like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. “I’ll tell you when I get back.”

“Damn it,” I said, slumping in my chair. “I can’t decide if you are ridiculously brave or mentally impaired.”

Vespyr tossed her head back and combed her fingers through her newly platinum hair. “Obviously, the latter. Just a ditzy blonde whore. I mean, who cares about my degree in high-energy physics.”

I wasn’t sure if that was supposed to be a joke or not. I decided to play it straight. “Point taken. We go with brave and determined.” I gave her a wink. “And very smart.”

Vespyr flopped back on the couch. “Smart, huh? I haven’t been home for three nights now and I don’t want Gazrall to see me like this. I mean, he’s agreeable with me being gone for a few hours, but I’ve never been away overnight. Or out of reach. Or involved.”

“Then I’ll try to be satisfied with the time we yet have together. And I’m a bit harder than the usual guy to kill.”

“That won’t help Jana and the others. I wish I could protect them, but I have to protect the entire planet — and I can do that only by leaving you and the rest behind to fend for yourselves. Be their protector.”

“I’ll do it,” I promised. “Or die trying.”

It took a couple of days to prepare the tube. It fit.

I knew we had to part then. I was feeling the pain of losing Vespyr — perhaps forever.

She turned and floated my way, hovering a foot off the floor. She looked down at me with those baby blues, which were even brighter for all the energy she’d absorbed. The golden tone of her skin had faded a bit from yesterday, but her hair was still that ultra blonde shade; almost white at the ends. Disturbingly, her dress was still stretched too tightly across her chest.

I was glad that she'd spent last night with me instead of going home to Gazrall, but I knew it wasn't just because of me — or even the messages. Gazrall would ask questions that she'd feel obligated to answer. But as soon as she was back to looking normal...

She'd be gone...

And me? A half-Aurean mutt who would be an outcast from both Tazzian and Aurean society if they found me out. A price on my head for pretending to be human. I might never see Vespyr again, whether or not she fulfilled her mission.

She couldn't give Gazrall any hint that things had changed between them — that she no longer felt any obligation to him. That meant, ironically, going back to him and doing whatever he wanted her to do.

Until the moment came to set out for Velor.

"It's called keeping up appearances," she teased me. "And maybe I can talk him around."

"If you make it home, will you ever be back? I'm going to miss you terribly."

"As I will miss you."

She looked sad, but tried to smile. She floated over to sit in my lap, enveloping me with her arms and the warmth of her hair. We shared a long passionate kiss before she lifted us both off the couch. We clung to each other as we flew upward through a large, open skylight in my apartment and into the blue sky above.

"This is too perfect of a day to spend doing anything less than making love under the bright sun," she whispered in my ear. "Assuming you're still interested in having me? Without the excitement of falling flitters, that is. You think you can handle that?"

I answered with a kiss, and then with more than a kiss.

"If you were Velorian, we could have a flying fuck," she said. "We'll have to settle for the usual kind."

We flew on until we found just the right place, and then we found just the right pace for our last lovemaking. Our relationship, always passionate but always fractious, was over.

"You've got to go to ground now, you and Jana," she warned me. "Don't even tell

me where.”

“But—”

“But nothing. I can’t protect you after I’m gone, and I can’t have any contact with you until then. The stakes are too high.”

Yet she had a parting word for me, which came as a relief, knowing that I thought it was better for her to take the safest route to Velor than the fastest one.

“Madstop,” she said.

And then she was gone.

Part Three: On the Run

Chapter Twelve

A few days later, there was word of a shakeup in Cathedral Square. Somebody named Mal’kar Klen had been named Minister of Defense, replacing Kimball Lewin.

I didn’t pay any attention to it at the time. I’d never even met Lewin; my dealings had been with Hawkwood, who wasn’t mentioned in the news feeds — but he never had been, any more than me. Nothing even hinting at the GAR was for public consumption; the Kirkland affair had been explained away.

I doubted that Vespyr had any interest in the matter — she had Madstop on her mind; any political machinations would be irrelevant. Yet she was still in the news —more staged events with Gazrall... and now also this Klen character. Where the hell had he come from? The off-world mining syndicate, the feeds said; he’d been involved in the Vendorian steel operation, but how did that translate into becoming defense minister? And why hadn’t I ever heard of him before, given that producing Vendorian steel from xintanite in our own system had been big news?

The rest of the Gazrall-controlled news was scary. Unaccountably, it seemed, Gazrall no longer interested in defending us against the Aureans — he was even said to be entertaining peace overtures by the Empire. If Vespyr had been trying to talk him

around, she hadn't succeeded at it. Official reports from Cathedral Square were vague, stressing the sovereignty of Tazzi, and the government's commitment to neutrality in any interstellar disputes.

I'd hooked up with Jana, but told her nothing about the Companion's plans to leave Tazzi. She knew enough about the GAR project, however, that she wouldn't be any safer than me if Gazrall found out about what we'd been up to. So we'd gone to ground, as Vespyr had suggested, at St. Bertwald's Monastery, hundreds of miles from the capital.

It wasn't a monastery any more, of course; hadn't been for two centuries since the Peasant Rebellion against the church. It was a sort of cross between a commune and a permanent floating party. The people who owned the place, isolated on a remote peninsula, believed in holding all things in common, including each other. But they also welcomed guests, people who wanted to get away from whatever it was people wanted to get away from — and were willing to pay cash. No names exchanged, no questions asked.

We had cleaned out our accounts in Oxbridge as soon as I came back to the city after Vespyr and I bade our farewells. No flitters for our escape; we'd stuck with ground transport, riding a bus fifty miles past our destination and then walking back — taking to the woods, avoiding the roads and villages, except when we needed food we couldn't forage for.

Jana was actually the one who had chosen our refuge, because she knew its history a whole lot better than I did. She'd studied hard at primary school to overcome her ignorance as a Zetan immigrant. I thought it was ironic that she had to fill me in, given that I should have been as persevering.

I *did* know that Tazzi's World had been seeded mostly with Terran peasants, known as churls, who had been forced to fight for rebellious earls against the Normans, whoever they were, over possession of a country called Angleland. It was common for earls to switch sides; those who switched to the Norman side might be pardoned, and the others executed.

Whatever happened to those earls, the Seeders didn't think their churls would be missed. The surviving earls would be, so none of them were taken. The churls were grateful — those who had fought for the losing side might have had their feet cut off. But

the Seeders had also swept up a number of country priests, with just enough education to consider themselves fit to rule, and the most ambitious among them began to style themselves bishops and enlist the common people to build churches and monasteries dedicated to archbishops of Canterbury who had been canonized. Yet, as with all ruling elites, power had gone to their heads — while they claimed to have forsaken worldly pleasures, they waxed fat off the land and its ordinary inhabitants.

Jana and I both doubted they had ever actually believed in the True Faith, and the commoners certainly hadn't. When the Scalantrans came to trade, they shattered the last shred of belief that their removal to this world had been part of a divine plan — rather than that of a Seeder overlord, perhaps a Galen, who had given his name to it.

The trigger for the rebellion had been the attempt to try goodly women, all comely and some married, for witchcraft — their only crime having been refusing the advances of high-ranking priests. Before long, men armed with bows or even with scythes and other farm implements attacked the priests in the countryside. The priests responded by burning alive the women they had in custody.

Commoners stormed the churches and monasteries, tearing priests and monks limb from limb, and setting fire to the buildings — where those not yet killed suffered the same fate as their victims. Only a few escaped, and went into hiding, or so the story went. There were legends that some still haunted the deep forests.

“One of my classmates, Devonna, had a four-great grandmother who was one of the goodly women,” Jana had told me, as we stopped to consume some provisions — along with some low-hanging fruit — on the way to safety at the monastery.

“What goodly women?”

“Adalaide was one of the few who managed to escape,” she said. “That’s why I’m taking her name.”

“We haven’t made it yet,” I pointed out. “By the way, why am I supposed to call myself Anselm?”

That had been another of her suggestions.

“He was a priest who broke with the other priests. And he married Adalaide.”

It seemed that some people thought Adalaide should have been made a saint. What they did make Anselm mayor of Oxbridge, with her at his side as alderwoman. All

sorts of things began to change; the old patriarchy and the old morality were doomed, albeit it took generations. Nobody today gives a second thought to women pursuing higher education, or serving in the learned professions.

“But nobody calls the men students scholaddies.”

“Nobody at St. Bertwald’s even calls women students ‘scholassies.’”

“You’ve really done your research.”

Once we’d settled in at St. Bertwald’s, nobody called us anything but Anselm and Adalaide, the names we gave to Chief Communard Dunstan — along with enough cash to cover room and board for a year. But we could stretch that out for a lot longer by working in the fields, as the monks once had, and the comunards still did. It took some getting used to, though: the comunards not only sang while they worked, as if farm labor were an ecstatic experience for them, but took sex breaks in plain sight. We could indulge our passions in what was once a cell — plain but comfortable. But if there were people next door who’d be listening in, which was often, we had to take to the woods.

St. Bertwald’s had supported itself by monastic labor, and hadn’t exploited the commoners as other Christian institutions had. Even so, it hadn’t survived the rebellion, and its last monks had fled for their lives — apparently blending in with the peasantry far from there. But the place hadn’t been burned, and its Latin manuscripts were preserved and eventually found their way to Oxbridge.

“Well, that make it all the more a tragedy that we don’t have any manuscripts from St. Justus,” Dunstan said one day after I shared that story with him.

“Why would that be?”

“We’ll never know just how they made Excelsior brandy.”

It was small talk, really, but that was the only kind of talk we *could* have with him, or anyone else at St. Bertwald’s. We had a cover story we’d made up for anybody who asked who we were or where we came from: she ran a physical training operation back in the capital, and I was one of her trainees who’d been enlisted as more than a trainee.

Some of the comunards and guests would raise their eyebrows, or snicker, or just turn away, depending on what they thought of such an arrangement. Others thought it was really great, and even brave of us — well, brave of me for letting Adalaide take the lead...

I had been afraid she'd feel the isolation more than I did — after all, she still had a living family, and there was that husband. But she was at pains to ease my mind on that score.

“They wanted nothing to do with me, after they heard about my... extracurricular activities at university,” she said. “And it's been the same with Kirk — I'm surprised he hasn't sued for divorce. I guess he must think it would just cost him too much, or bring too much bad publicity.”

I remembered her extracurricular activities at Oxbridge. Her bisexuality had never bothered me, as long as I'd gotten all I wanted — which wasn't hard, as she seemed to want it any time, anywhere. Of course, there was the kink, but I could live with that.

* * *

“Is Gazrall crazy?” I asked.

It was a month later. We were taking a walk outside the commune, but we had just heard the news.

There still hadn't been anything about Vespyr, apart from the staged publicity events — which continued to focus on peace and neutrality. I wondered if the pretense made her nauseous.

But today's lead story was that the Scalantran factor general had been arrested, along with his mate group, on charges of smuggling.

“Maybe he thinks they somehow spirited that GAR off the planet,” Jana said.

She knew all about the GAR, even if I hadn't told her about Vespyr's travel plans, so I could still joke about the absurdity of the arrests.

“As if his agents wouldn't have spotted it at the spaceport,” I fairly snorted.

“And as if the only Scalantran ship to lift off from here hadn't been headed in the wrong direction.”

“They'll interdict the planet,” Jana predicted. “Bad enough to arrest Vaharem, but his *mate group*? Doesn't he think at all? Or does this new defense chief think for him?”

“He doesn't have to think. At least he doesn't *think* he has to think. He only has to *act*.”

I paused for a moment.

“I'm sorry I got you mixed up in all this, Jana.”

“I was the one who got you mixed up with Vespyr, remember? Only I didn’t know what it was all about... until... Anyway, it’s kind of a lark being here.”

“Only as long as they don’t find us,” I reminded her. “And they’re looking, you can be sure of that.”

That made Jana nervous, so she changed the subject.

“Do you think the monks who used to live here would be outraged at the goings on? Or just jealous?”

“Jealous of me. Lusting for you.”



Maybe she'd been fishing for a compliment was, but I knew that the fact I was half Aurean turned her on. And her muscular body turned me on — she actually *looked* more powerful than Vespyr, although I knew that was an illusion.

“I want your heavenly cock,” she said, right there, outdoors, in broad daylight.

“I want your heavenly cunt,” I responded. “And all the rest of you.”

And it really was heavenly, especially when she took top position and rode me — to feel her pounding me into the ground, to gaze at her breasts with their hard nipples, to know that she was cumming as I came inside her...

Things were far simpler with Jana than with Vespyr. We had only each other. We couldn't seek intimacy with anyone else; it was too risky. Something or someone might give us away.

Only we didn't know the half of it.

* * *

We were playing palmball one afternoon when we got the *really* bad news.

Jana had been winning because I wasn't experienced at the game, and with my half-Aurean strength I had trouble swatting the ball just enough to clear the net without going out of bounds.

We were interrupted by Dunstan himself, who spoke quietly after looking around to make sure nobody else was within earshot.

“New London is circulating your pictures, with your actual names, which I shan't repeat here or anywhere else,” he said. “They're accusing you of treason, but without anything to back it up.”

He looked at us gravely, but sympathetically.

“I don't believe a word of it – not with what's coming out of Cathedral Square day after day. These are troubled times, to say the least, and the trouble's coming straight from the top. I'll say no more; I have to look after my people here, and I can't put them in danger.”

“We appreciate that, I said.”

“And I'm sure you can also appreciate why you won't be safe here. You can trust our communards never to betray you, but the same cannot be said of our other guests. I have suspended newsfeeds and com service on grounds of technical difficulties, but I

can't keep them down for long without arousing suspicion — and it's possible one of the guests had already reported you before the shutdown."

Here he paused, before telling them the inevitable.

"I'm sorry, but I would advise you to gather your belongings and leave as soon as possible."

"I understand."

"And you can understand why you can't even say your goodbyes to anyone else here."

"We can live with that," I said. "And we can avoid contact with others."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, we'll have to live off the land."

"I'm afraid so," Dunstan lamented.

Hunting and gathering, I thought. *Like our most distant ancestors on Earth.*

"Plenty of game in the forest," Dunstan ventured, as if reading my thoughts. "And the fruits and nuts should be safe."

It didn't take us long to get ready, and nobody paid any attention to us as we left. The communards were hard at work, harvesting crops to see them through the coming winter, while the guests had gotten up a game of mob football. If they noticed us at all, they probably thought we were just going out for a private fuck.

"We'll have to work our way south, to where it'll be warmer," I said.

"And stay out of sight."

We were about a dozen miles south of the monastery, and it was getting dark, when there was suddenly a flash of light behind us, brighter than the sun at midday. I knew instantly what it meant.

"*They nuked it, they nuked it!*" I shouted.

Jana was about to turn.

"Don't look back," I warned her. "We've got to run."

"But—"

"They're dead, all dead. They wanted to make sure. They knew I'd be harder to kill — they didn't want to leave it to chance."

"Gazrall, It has to be his doing. The bastard, the fucking bastard."

I suddenly had another thought.

“I’ve had nightmares about this. Dying and yet not dying.”

“You’re a psychic as well as a half-Aurean?”

“I don’t have any idea. I only know what we have to do now.”

“Which is?”

“Like I said before, we still have to work our way south, to where it’ll be warmer.”

“And stay out of sight,” Jana agreed.

“Our com batteries will last only so long. How will we get replacements? How will we know when it’s safe to get back to civilization?”

“If there’s still ia civilization worth going back to.”

There wasn’t much to say after that.

Chapter Thirteen

“Anselm...” Adalaide said in a low voice.

It had come to that. We were using our assumed names, even with each other. It was safer that way. Less chance of slipping up.

I turned in Adalaide’s direction. She’d spotted a coney off to the right, not a fellow human being. Dinner, not danger. Not that we’d expected the latter here. I quickly speared the coney and got busy with the extra knife skinning it while she gathered twigs and small branches for a fire.

We had been traveling light, trying to remain inconspicuous. We’d stolen the knives and a length of wire at a house in the first settlement we’d approached after fleeing St. Bertwald’s. Just those; the people there, who were away from home at the time, might think they’d only mislaid them... not raise a hue and cry. We hoped so. But we made tracks from there just the same.

I’d used the wire to attach one of the knives to a stake for the spear. The next chance we got at another settlement, I stole batteries for the com. That had been a few weeks later. We still had a few spontaneous combustion sulphur spunks left, parting gifts of the comunard chief, but I’d practiced with the fire strikers he’d also supplied, and by then I was quite handy with them. I’d used bits of our underwear at first for char-cloth to

catch the sparks, but later experimented with dry moss and that worked just as well — maybe better.

And now here we were... six months and about a thousand miles later, give or take.

Dinner was good, if nothing to cheer about — coney and other small game got monotonous after a while. Occasionally, I'd take down a small deer, although it seemed a waste — we couldn't eat it all before it went bad. I was quick enough to grab fish from streams we encountered. Wild peas, berries and nuts sufficed for the rest, and Adalaide was good at spotting them.

I wouldn't have recognized the name she went by a year ago, but chances are that few people I knew that long ago would recognize me as Kevin Galton now. The long beard, the shabby clothing... they'd take me for a beggar.

Adalaide looked a lot more like Jana Sunderland of old, but she now seemed even more muscular. Having to keep on the move and live off the land will do that to a woman — or even a man not blessed with my part-Aurean genetic heritage.

We'd begun working our way south after our first thefts, after we'd sharpened our wilderness skills, headed for the Great Table — a plateau near the equator where we'd escape the coming winter back home, but avoid the tropical lowlands and the chancy food resources there. Familiar game would be abundant, we figured, having spread over the whole continent after the peasant rebellion, and the forests and fields should yield abundant other foods.

We'd been right on both counts, and the country here was beautiful as well as bountiful. We could have imagined we were on a long vacation, or even visiting a virgin planet far, far away — if only we hadn't known better. We wished we hadn't known; we avoided talking about the past, although we couldn't avoid thinking about it.

We hadn't even given a listen to the news feeds for a month now, wanting to spare the batteries. Or maybe it was just denial. The last we'd heard, it was about the the murder of that defense minister Mal'kar and the nuking of St. Bertwald's — there'd been innuendo on the feeds about an alien conspiracy behind both, but without anyone naming names. That was strange enough in itself; even stranger — to us, at least — was that there hadn't

been any mention of Vespyr — did that mean she had gotten away, or that she had somehow been dealt with?

There was nothing else on the com to entertain us, that was for sure, But we had ways to entertain each other, and the fact that I was sterile meant we weren't taking any risks. Not that we neglected hygiene, we made free use of the streams for washing as well as food. We wanted to taste good to each other, naturally.

Living in the wild had made Adalaide even wilder, if you can believe that. Well, more aggressive — she'd come on to me strong, pounding me into the ground like a pile driver. But there was something especially romantic about it that night, watching her naked above me in the flickering light of the fire, taking me into her and riding me with all the fire of her passion.

There was nothing to come between us any more, not even Vespyr. She knew it and I knew it, although we hadn't even mentioned her name in a while. As I came, I shouted Adalaide's true name, and as she came, she shouted mine. It was only when making love that we used them.

It was the next morning, in the remembered afterglow, that she suggested we finally catch up with the news.

There was a still state of emergency. A week earlier, the Legislature had approved an enabling, naming Salomon Gazrall Supreme Leader. So he was still on top, with a new title. What had become of the ministries and other organs of government wasn't mentioned, but his com cast today had to do with the nature of the emergency.

There was a threatened Velorian invasion, he told the world — the nuking of the historic monastery had been just the first strike — but his people needn't fear: Tazzi had a new weapon, a weapon so powerful that even the Velorians couldn't prevail against it.

We were stunned.

"He's bluffing, of course," I said. "Lying through his teeth."

"But why? And why bother assuming outright control of the government when it was already doing his bidding?"

Still no mention of Vespyr.

We continued listening, but there was nothing about the Armory or any of the people who'd worked with me on the heavy GAR — just vague references to patriotic

engineers dedicated to serving the planet. Before the news service cut to sports, there was an apparently routine announcement that the new government wouldn't tolerate "criminal elements" in league with the Scalantrans.

"There may have more details a week ago, when all this broke," Adalaide said. "About those 'criminal elements,' I mean. But how can we possibly find out?"

"Maybe there'll be more about that later on the feeds. If not, we might make for a settlement and try to find out."

"None on the Great Table. That was the whole idea of coming here. I don't think it would be a good idea to backtrack."

"Me either. But there's the Oxbridge experiment station."

Only that was in the lowlands, a hundred miles away. It was or had been under the jurisdiction of the Intellectual Service, my own but had been collaborating with the Agricultural Service on breeding tropical crops with commercial potential.

Not that anything to do with crops mattered to us, I told her.

"Except to use in soufflés?"

"Bad joke."

And a reminder of all the ordinary things we were missing. I could see that she instantly regretted it.

"But seriously," she asked. "What would they know?"

"They're a government agency. They'd have to be privy to more than what gets out on the feeds. Hopefully a *lot* more."

"But we can't just walk in there!"

"We could scout around it, at least. See if the coast is clear as far as the Military Service is concerned. Maybe we could approach somebody working in the field. Maybe he'd open up to a fellow Intellectual Service man."

"What if he doesn't? What if...?"

"We run like hell."

"And if he does?"

"We still run like hell — but better prepared to wait... and hope... if she can't get her people to come to our aid, our lives aren't going to be worth much. If she can, we've got to improve our odds of surviving until then any way we can."

I didn't mention Vespyr by name. I didn't have to. Like it or not our lives, and those of countless others, were in her hands.

"What if we can't get any help? What if we can't find anyone we can trust? How will we survive?"

"We'll *steal*."

[Continued in Book Two: *An Odyssey of Hope*](#)