

First Protector

Book Two: Odyssey of Hope

By Brantley, inspired by Shadar

Book Two of Three in the story of the end of one era and the beginning of another in the history of the Aurora Universe.

Part One: Desperate Journey

Chapter One

No time to think, only to act, on the spur of the moment. I wouldn't have a second chance if I lingered on Tazzi. I took off, straight up; I had to get out of sight and out of range of Enemy forces, before they learned of Mal'kar's death.

Only when I reached space could I take thought, but it was hard to think straight, because I had been consumed by rage. I wanted to kill that bastard Gazrall. I wanted to kill that bitch Jana. I almost wanted to kill myself for letting myself be violated by Mal'kar – that's how I felt: *violated*. It was horror, but also shame – the worst shame I could imagine. My rage had served me well in dealing with him, but it was something I knew I had to put behind me. The mission came first. I owed that to Kevin...

The mission. I knew the Aureans had a ship in the system, with its own GAR, but I didn't have any idea where, or how long it would take word to reach them by radio; but they'd be ordered to hunt me down. And they could accelerate faster than a Scalantran ship; even the Betans could take much higher Gs than Scalantrans or humans. They'd hope to intercept me before I reached the wormhole – not likely, but if they missed me here, they could follow me to Madstop and attack me there, or even target the *Margin of Profit* if I made it onto the ship on time. I might be throwing away my life and the lives of everyone aboard.

There was only one thing to do: change course for the Selene wormhole – the more dangerous one. I was far enough away that nobody was likely to spot me if I made that turn, and already going too fast for anyone to get a bead on me. But that meant I couldn't make a tight turn. I was going to lose time, changing my vector. Not much, but every moment might count. It was going to be close; I had to make it to Selene in time to catch the *Boundless Opportunity*. That was my only chance – and the only chance for Tazzi.

I still felt the anger and hurt from what had happened there. I had betrayed Kevin, a good man who hadn't deserved his fate, whose only concern had been for his planet. Nuked, along with hundreds of innocents, at a commune. How Mar'kal had found out where he was, he'd never told – even on the point of his own death at my hands. It had to have been Jana, I thought – who else would have known where he was?

As I put distance between myself and Tazzi. I could begin to think more calmly. That confirmed the wisdom of my instant decision. Madstop was where Mar'kal would have told Gazrall I'd be heading, and Gazrall would have told the Aureans. I'd wanted to play it safe when I'd chosen that option – just in case. They might already be waiting at the Madstop wormhole, if they'd learned about Mal'kar.

Forget about Mal'kar, I told myself now. I knew there was only one way to honor Kevin's memory. I wasn't a Believer, yet I prayed to Skietra just the same – that I would reach the wormhole in time, get through it in time, arrive at Selene in time... neither rage nor prayers could bring Kevin back, or be of any use to avenging him.

I knew what to look for, even though I'd never seen a wormhole, let alone been through one – other than safely within the Scalantran ship that had brought me to Tazzi.

Wormhole physics had been part of my studies back at the Academy. It was important for us to know about them, not just from a scientific standpoint but to understand and appreciate the universe we lived in – a universe where it was possible to travel from star to star in a year or two, rather than decades or even centuries or millennia.

Where it was possible to have interstellar empires and interstellar wars...

I avoided any close encounters with the insystem ships that served the off-planet mining operations. There hadn't been any Scalantrans – their next visit wasn't due for a year and, in any case, their ship would be going the wrong way... if they were even allowed to leave, their kind having been declared enemies of the State. Three days out at top acceleration, and the entry beacons were coming into view. I could read them easily with my enhanced vision, even at the speed I was traveling.

The wormhole was in stable phase – thank Skietra. I knew my course, the vector that would lead me to Selene.

What I didn't know was how painful it would be. Few Velorians had any real understanding of pain, having felt it so rarely. But I was now an exception, and the experience of that exception was fresh in my memory. I first felt a dull ache, a sensation of tiredness, as I imagined I might feel if I had spent the day moving a mountain. Then it was if someone were pulling on my arms and legs. I knew it must be an effect of the gravitational tides.

Then the heat, and the burning. Like...

I was right to have had Kevin test the GAR on me, I thought. I had to know what I could take. I owed him for that. I'd always owe him. I'd owe him for having tested me to the limit, and for having refused to go any further. I'd owe him for the idea of extracting the GAR control chips, for making my mission possible...

Before long, it hurt too terribly for me to think that clearly. But I could still fly; I knew deep down that I was on the right vector. There was nothing but the excruciating pain – and my determination to endure and get past it. And in the end, it wasn't as excruciating as with the GAR, after all – not quite, or I'd indeed never have made it. But I still might not have made it, if I hadn't known that I'd endured worse.

In the back of my mind, in spite of the agony, I knew the fate of countless billions of Terrans were depending on me, even if they didn't know it. The Scalantrans, too,

were depending on me, although they too couldn't know it. And Velor itself. I couldn't see any of their stars from here, in the narrow passage marked by the beacons. But they were there, and their worlds mattered, and the people on those worlds mattered... just as Kevin had mattered. That knowledge, too, helped see me through...

Finally, suddenly, the unfathomable darkness of the wormhole lifted and the stars in their myriads blazed before me in all their glory. The pain left me and I was overcome by a sense of freedom. I could see Selene's sun in the distance, and I knew I'd reach the planet in plenty of time to catch the *Boundless Opportunity*.

Within me, I felt the Vendorian steel tube and its precious chips. I sensed that they too had survived. Only, what was I going to tell the Scalantrans? Would they trust me if I told the entire truth, the truth that was so shameful to me? If I failed to make the right impression on Bensalem, from the very start, I'd never have a second chance. Kevin was coming to my aid, even in death. He'd shared the two Scalantran messages about the GAR intercepted by Gazrall's people – that would give me an advantage, both in the knowledge itself and the fact that Selene's factor general would not take kindly to Gazrall's having breached Scalantran security. For that reason alone, Bensalem might be willing to overlook the fact that I was in violation of my contract with Gazrall.

Breaking indenture had previously been accepted by the Scalantrans, I knew, but in that case Ju'lette had saved the *Far Wanderer* from the Aureans. It was too great a debt to go unpaid, just as my own debt to Kevin was too great to go unpaid. And yet Ju'lette had ultimately failed to win over the High Council or the Senate, even with the Tanzrobians there to bear witness to the use of the light GAR on their planet.

It was smooth flying now, and yet I was weary, not only from the wormhole passage but from the racing of my mind. I had to come up with something tellable about the Aurean involvement on Tazzi that didn't involve me personally. I'd have to convince Bensalem of the importance of my mission; how much more important the heavy GAR was than a simple matter of trade or a TIO. I'd have to scare him out of his wits, and arouse his anger towards the Empire, without ever showing any sign of weakness on my own part.

And once I'd convinced him, I'd still have to convince Velor. What Tazzi and other planets faced now was far direr, than anything that had befallen Nova Iberia or

Tanzrobi – too terrible to contemplate – yet I would have to make the High Council contemplate it. There was one card I could play that I hadn't expected to have just a few days ago: Like Ju'lette, I could justify breaking my indenture under the Exception. If Gazrall hadn't shown his hand, I might have been taken for a deserter.

But now I would be bringing the GAR chips *and* the knowledge that the enemy had taken control of the world I'd fled in all but name. The High Council would have to listen to me. But to reach them, I would have to reach Velor, and for that I had to reach Bensalem. First things first, although I knew that would be only the beginning.

Chapter Two

Naked I came into the world, and naked I had come out of the wormhole. I might have landed far from Novy Kyiv, and found something to wear into the capital. But time might be of the essence, so I decided to make a grand entrance.

It was grand, all right, but turned out to be an embarrassment. I'd heard that Selene was a modern, industrialized planet, much like Tazzi – and so I assumed that its manners and mores would be much the same.

The first man to spot me called out to others in the street.

“Smotritye, v nebye! Eto ptitsa! Eto samolyet! Nyet, eto zhenshina! Golaya zhenshina! Goliye letayushei zhenshinh! Eto dolzhna byt Veloryet.”

I didn't know any Russian. It was only later that I learned that from far below he'd mistaken me at first for a bird or an airplane, but finally realized I was a flying woman – and there was only one kind of flying woman in the universe... Nobody here knew just who I was, and nobody back on Tazzi or anywhere else knew I was here. I wanted to keep it that way, which meant I had to make contact as soon as possible with somebody who could understand – and help.

I came in for a landing in what appeared to be the central plaza of Novy Kyiv, much like Cathedral Square back in New London. A huge building on one side had towers with peculiar-looking domes topped by crosses; it was obviously still in use for its original purpose. Three ornate buildings on other sides, from which flew flags, I took to be government offices.

There were hundreds of people about, within a few seconds they were gawking at me – men and women alike. Only the men were blushing, even though they couldn't take their eyes off me, while the women frowned – or simply turned away. Traffic in the plaza came to a dead stop as the Novy Kyivans milled about, the crowd growing by the moment as curious people emerged from the buildings to see what all the fuss was about.

I had to make contact – but I hadn't dared arouse suspicion on Tazzi by seeking deepteach in Russian. I'd decided to improvise enough from a phrase book to – hopefully – get by. The first thing was to try to find somebody who spoke my adopted language.

“Lyuboi zdyes govorit po-angliiski?” I shouted at the top of a human voice to one and all. “Ya rodom iz Tazzi.”

Surprisingly, it was a woman, emerging from the government building across from the cathedral, who responded.

“Propustitye menya, pozhalusta!” she yelled at the crowd around me

Everyone else still appeared to be showing confusion and/or outrage, but this woman seemed to know what she was about as she worked her way towards me. She conveyed an air of importance; perhaps she was well known in the city. At any rate, the crowd parted to make way for her.

When she reached me, she gave me a frank look.

“I speak... some English. We do business, offworld.”

I nodded.

“Best to get from street. Not to cause riot. We take my ground car.”

Best indeed, I thought.

First contact. The rest to follow, if things went well...

The car was as modern as the buildings and dress of the Kyivans was traditional – including that of the woman's driver, who studiously ignored the nudity of his new passenger.”

“Just come from export license meeting at Ministry,” the woman said. “Lucky I be there for you. Most not understand about Velorians. Even Companions here not often seen.”

A few minutes later, we reached our destination, an office building of stone and brick in an elaborate decorative pattern, and I followed the richly dressed woman inside, where they took an elevator to the third floor. The sign on door of her place of business was in the local language, of which I knew only a few phrases – I couldn't make it out, but I hoped it was the right place to bring my message.

Адвокатское бюро Губина

Иностранные коммерческой деятельности

It was a law office representing companies that traded off-world, I was soon to learn.

The woman led me into the suite and down a corridor, past the offices of fellow workers, paying no attention to their startled reactions, and motioned me into her private office.

She remained standing for a moment against a decorative screen as she introduced herself.

“My name Mayra Gubin. Partner in this bureau, which supply advice on dealings with Scalantrans. I see you Velorian, but not one belong here. That confuse people in street. Two of our commersants have Companions. You be neither. Please to explain.”

“I am Vespyr Tal'esta. I have come here to Selene to report a dire emergency, one that you cannot imagine, but which threatens the survival of all civilized worlds – including yours. I will explain to you, and to the Scalantrans here, and I must then find passage on the *Boundless Opportunity* to Velor, in order to inform the Senate about the very same emergency.”

“You have credit with Scalantrans, or Velor?”

I could only shake my head.

She frowned.

“And how you propose to pay passage?”

“By saving the Scalantrans from destruction.”

I tried to look as earnest as possible, which indeed is what I was. Was I getting through to her?

Mayra stood there for a moment, apparently trying to take it all in, then broke into a slight smile.



“You have obviously violated Scalantran contract, leaving Tazzi. You make spectacle of self on arrival, and expect us believe destruction awaits if we not do as you tell. Your story absurd. So absurd as to command belief.”

I couldn't conceal my relief, and I could see by Mayra's expression that she could tell that.

“To begin at beginning, how came you here?”

“I flew. Through the wormhole.”

Mayra's jaw dropped.

“And I am not in violation of my contract. I discovered that its holder was in league with the Aureans.”

Mayra looked at me gravely.

“Must take you see Rurik.”

Rurik Gubin was the senior partner of the firm. Also her father. Did enterprises here on Selene all run in the family?

But before they could meet, Mayra had to find something for me to wear, sending out for a linen gown similar to hers. In fact, it was one of her own – only green. It fit more tightly over my chest, but there was no helping that. It was only then that I thought to correct her impression that I was a contract breaker.

“Natural error,” she commented.

“I agree. I’ll explain it all.”

* * *

Mayra escorted me to a conference room, where Rurik awaited. His hair and beard were red, the first I’d seen here, although beards seemed to be the custom on Selene. It turned out that he had better command of English than his daughter. For some reason, people in his family had a tradition of learning foreign languages the hard way, rather than by deepteach. He heard me out patiently, never interrupting me with questions or comments.

When I finished, he showed his intelligence by asking first about the control and data chips for the GAR she carried.

“They’re your only hard evidence,” he said. “We should have the engineers at the Veliky plant examine the chips closely, and make copies if possible. You may return to Mayra’s office to retrieve them.”

Rurik was putting it politely; I’d made it clear, without dwelling on it, that I’d carried them internally.

I understood and returned to Mayra’s office, retiring behind the screen there to lift up my gown and, carefully – *very carefully* – remove the Vendorian steel tube with its chips from my vagina, praying that indeed they had not been damaged. They had been given the best protection a Velorian could give.

Rurik explained where we were going next. His firm handled export contracts with the Scalantans for a company called Veliky Vagon Tvorets.

“They produce advanced technology for export, including mining equipment for Madstop. Their engineers are also familiar with Vendorian steel. Perhaps they could open your container more safely than you could be by hand.”

“I understand. But I can’t let it or the chips out of my sight. It’s my responsibility.”

“Agreed.”

* * *

The engineers at Veliky Vagon Tvorets were impressed by the chips, once they’d opened the tube and had a chance to scan them.

“Ochen moshny,” the first said.

“Ochen pugayet,” the second added.

“Opredelenno Ariiskoi proizvodstva,” replied the first.

“Very powerful. Very frightening,” Rurik translated. “Definitely Aurean-made.”

Vladimir Sokolnikov was the elder, head of the department that produced the mining platforms for Madstop – which had to withstand extreme heat in order for the men of that hellish planet to retrieve the precious flame jewels that brought them wealth, if not exactly security. He was in his 60’s, I judged, rather stout, his hair and beard going white. But he was in full command of his faculties and, like Rurik, avoided any outward expression of interest in me as a woman.

Igor Voinov was what they called an “aspirant,” learning on the job after receiving a basic education. Early 20’s, his hair and beard coal black. But neither his facial hair nor his attention to the business at hand could conceal the longing in his expression – a longing he must imagine was hopeless.

The only Velorians he could know of were the Companions here, and they were far, far beyond reach – let alone touch. He must have heard tell of Velorians’ powers. But could he know, right this moment, that I could see what strained against his pants, and that I *wanted* it? I was ashamed to want it, though it was my very nature as Velorian to want it. I had betrayed Kevin; I felt I no longer deserved pleasure – but now my body was betraying me. Only I had to appear calm, to focus on the discussion at hand.

“You can see why the Scalantrans will want to cooperate,” I said. “They know only of the hand-carried version of the GAR. What we found on Tazzi is a ship killer, perhaps even a planet killer.”

Rurik translated that, and Vladimir’s response.

“You have good cause for alarm; we had heard of nothing like this before, and the Scalantrans indeed must indeed be warned. Their ships will be as vulnerable as the *Admiral Kirkland*. We shall of course add our voice to yours in this matter. We would also like to make copies of the chips. Further research would be helpful. We might even find some clues in the basic programming as to how to counter this weapon.”

“You may do so, provided it doesn’t risk any damage,” I cautioned.

I couldn’t understand the annoyance on Vladimir’s face as he grunted a response.

“Everyone knows that Veliky Vagon Tvorets can be trusted,” Rurik explained. “I shall tell him you are ignorant, and meant no disrespect.”

* * *

It turned out that their engineers, while they couldn’t speak English, were, like Rurik, fluent in Scalantran. Bensalem could speak Rus, of course; that was required of him as Factor General for Selene. But as a courtesy to him, and in view of the gravity of the situation, they all agreed to use Scalantran, with Rurik translating and from and to my English whenever I needed to give my first-hand account and be informed of the reactions of the Factor General and the engineers to whatever the Factor General had to say.

I couldn’t tell the difference between him and his counterpart Vaharem on Tazzi. It had been a long time since I had seen Vaharem up close – Gazrall rarely had direct dealings with him – and even longer since I’d shared the company of the Scalantrans on the *Hopeful Trader*. It was strange being the center of conversation rather than only of attention at Bensalem’s office near the spaceport.

It got off to a rough start, although I didn’t realize it at the time. I had cause to regret that I had never learned Scalantran, or how to pick up Scalantran body language, and it was only after our meeting that I learned Bensalem had been in a bad mood: it seemed that we have interrupted a private time between him and his one-mate, and that

it had been only Rurik's insistence that there was a dire emergency that had brought him to the conference room.

Rurik began by introducing me, explaining who I was and where I came from, and that I had first-hand knowledge of an Aurean presence on Tazzi and likewise first-hand knowledge a new Aurean weapon terrible beyond anything he could imagine that threatened every civilized world and his own people. That got his attention, for his response was curt and yet encouraging.

"He says, 'You may proceed now,'" Rurik translated.

So I proceeded. I didn't exactly tell the truth. Nothing about Kevin, and not even a hint about a Prime. I told Bensalem that I had discovered Gazrall's Chief Armorer was in fact an Aurean Beta, and that the Empire had not only supplied a working heavy GAR but intended to produce more of them on Tazzi, which could then use them to conquer planets in neighboring systems and establish a satrapy tributary to Aurea. The heavy GARs would also be used to destroy Scalantran ships and cripple interstellar trade. By sleight of tongue, I managed to work in doctored versions of the *Admiral Kirkland* affair, and even the test on myself, in graphic detail. I also told him how the Chief Armorer had intercepted and translated Scalantran message traffic reaching Tazzi, and that he had been pleased to learn that the Scalantrons had been playing into Aurean hands – and about the detention of Vaharem and his mate group.

That really startled Bensalem.

As I said, it wasn't entirely the truth. But it was true enough to the Aurean threat, and what that meant to Terrans and Scalantrons alike. It was the truth that Bensalem needed to hear, and act on. I had already told it to Rurik, and he had come prepared with a printed version of the key points of my account, a copy of which he handed to the Factor General.

Rurik made his own remarks, about how credible my account had been, and then it was Vladimir's turn to brief Bensalem on his firm's analysis of the GAR chips. Rurik had made printed copies of both testimonies, and handed them over, along with copies of the chips themselves. I had no way to judge Bensalem's reaction to all that, but he had questions for Rurik and Vladimir, mostly to do with legal and technical matters, I was later told. He had finished with the others, he had only one question for me.

“How did you feel when they tested the GAR on you?” Rurik interpreted.

“Like I was going to die.”

Bensalem was silent for several moments after hearing the translation. Then he turned to Rurik and couldn't seem to stop talking. *I can read that*, I thought at the time, and I was right.

* * *

“He's convinced,” Rurik told me afterwards. “He now suspects the Aureans may have been playing a trick on them by allowing them to find out about the smaller version of the GAR, the kind that was used on Gebron and Tanzrobi. Filing for Trade Intellectual Ownership could be considered an act of war. The Empire has denied responsibility for the attack on the *Far Wanderer* and Nova Iberia, insisting it was a rogue operation.”

“A likely story,” I commented.

“Bensalem never believed it, either, and he's terribly frightened by your account of the heavy GAR – and the Aurean presence on Tazzi. And the arrests of our people there. As we speak, he is drafting an updated general advisory urging that any attempt to file for a TIO, no matter how great the potential profits, be abandoned forthwith. That should get the message out. It will take time for it to get around, but it *will* get around.”

“Now I have to take the same message to Velor.”

“Bensalem has seen to your passage. The fact that you left Tazzi under the Exception made it easier for him, although I'm sure he would have made a case for you in any event. But that will remain a secret. As will the details about Aurean involvement on Tazzi.”

“I don't understand.”

“The official story is that you will return whence you came. That is referred to in the general advisory, and will therefore be believed. It will be believed here, as well, in the off chance there are any Aurean agents here – although I think the chances of that are slim. Traffic control into our system is very tight, and the Companions have instructions from Velor to cooperate in any security operations that may be necessary to deal with agents of the Empire. You'll be staying with us until you can catch a ship back home. Part of the art of war, and this is a war, is the art of deception.”

I nodded.

“Another part of the art of war is the war of words. I’ve also persuaded Bensalem that it is in the best interests of the Scalantrans that you be deeptaught in their own language.”

“The travel captains and trade captains speak Velorian.”

“But there are many Scalantrans who don’t; most of their ships don’t even call on Velor, and then there are the meetpoints and youthworlds, the only places where they can meet and share news with the crews of those which do.”

“Outsiders aren’t supposed to visit those, or even know where they are,” I said. “I managed to find out a bit of it aboard the *Hopeful Trader*, perhaps because I expressed such an interest in cosmology and galactic history.”

“But your voice could reach them. You could make recordings about what you have learned, to be shared with Scalantrans everywhere. To see you with their own eyes, to hear you speak in their own language... That is what I told Bensalem.”

“I see.”

“But I left one thing out: *intelligence*. What do they know that we don’t know? You might just overhear something...”

Chapter Three

And so it came to pass that, wearing the same borrowed green gown but with a hooded cloak as further disguise, I stepped aboard the *Boundless Opportunity*. I had papers that identified me as Mayra’s sister Olga; but Bensalem had informed the travel captain of my actual identity in a coded message. His message also requested that I be deeptaught Scalantran to spread word about what they were all facing.

The travel captain’s name was Manesha; like other Scalantran females she had ears that were rounder on top, with the lobes slightly longer than those of males. Her nasal openings were likewise smaller and more oval in shape. She told me right off how Bensalem had won her over: then saw me to my quarters, where a deepteach machine had already been set up. She explained to me how to use it, then went back to her duties without further ado.

I didn’t see Manesha again for some months of real time; instead I was handed over to the ship’s historian, Kinyam, who worked with me on mastering what seemed at

first a mere jumble of words that had poured into my mind. It took time, but I finally got the hang of it, and was relieved to know that I need no longer be a stranger to anyone here, but could share my thoughts with any Scalantrans who wished to. In turn, I might even learn something that would be of use to her mission...

There hadn't been an official send-off, for obvious reasons. But I came aboard with warm memories of the previous night. I had been feeling lonely, and imagined that I had nothing to look forward to but more loneliness until I reached her home – my real home. But my benefactor had something else in mind.

"Before you leave, I have a parting gift for you, and for Igor," Rurik said.

"I don't understand."

He drew forth a necklace of gold.

"Igor awaits you at the Dnyepyr Inn, his private quarters being... inadequate to the occasion."

"But— "

"Public displays of affection are frowned upon on Selene. Private displays are quite a different matter. I could see that Igor was struggling to conceal his desire for you, and he has no other attachments at the present time. So I had a discussion with Vladimir, and he agreed that you two should spend some pleasurable time together."

"You didn't discuss it with me!"

"Would there have been any need to? We know about Velorians, and the manner of your first appearance in the Central Square testifies to your own shamelessness. You were obviously inviting lust in public, and while the nature of your mission indeed called for a spectacular entrance, it offended traditional sensibilities here. It was only because my daughter rightly suspected that must have come on urgent business that she was willing to bring you in."

"I see," I told him. And I did. I could hardly beg off. I hadn't told them anything about Kevin; I hadn't even mentioned his name in my report. It would seem inexplicable, not to mention undiplomatic, for me to show any reluctance. And I truly didn't feel any. I needed it. I was a Velorian and I *needed* it. I especially needed it to help me distance myself from the memory of Mal'kar...

“Here are directions to the inn,” Rurik said, handing me a paper. “You will find Igor in Room 117. Here are a few Russian phrases that may prove helpful, as his English is not as good as mine or Vladimir’s.”

I found the room easily enough. It held a large a bed, which I hoped was sturdy. And it held Igor, whose face was filled with wonder as well as longing when I entered. I could see his erection straining against his pants, and smiled at him as I directed my gaze there. I removed my gown, and he arose and stripped of his tunic and pants – he wore nothing beneath them.

I was naked but for my necklace. He must know what *that* was for, and his cock twitched. But he looked at my gold only for a second; then his eyes were riveted on my breasts.

I could see and practically feel Igor’s own aching need, and I felt the same need. I approached him boldly, took his hands and placed them where I knew he wanted them – on my breasts. He squeezed them, marveling at their firmness, then stroked them, and my nipples stiffened at his touch. With my left hand, I stroked his hair, and brought his face to mine, kissing him gently. With my right, I caressed his cock. Then I broke away, but only to lie down on the bed, with open arms and legs.

“Lezhi s mnoj,” I invited him. *Lie with me.*

In a moment, he was on me, and in me, pounding me into the bed. I thrilled to the feel of him, my wetness easing his passage as his manhood triggered all my pleasure centers. Faster, deeper, harder! It felt so good. I bucked to meet his thrusts. It couldn’t last long; he was too excited. But he cried with joy as he came, and so did I.

I knew he’d be up for another round... several more rounds. He wasn’t Kevin, but Igor was what I needed just then: raw sex without complications. No hidden agenda, no political motivations, just the act itself. The *goodness* of it. That, and the feeling of being in control of my life again, the feeling of being a *Velorian*. Igor couldn’t imagine how much it meant to me; to him Velorians were goddesses – invulnerable but unattainable. What befell me on Tazzi had left me feeling very vulnerable, and even ashamed. But here, I could feel my old self come back to life.

If Igor had thought it was all over after he came, I quickly disabused him. I kissed him on the lips again, then surprised him my changing position so that I could kiss his

cock, which sprang back to life. That wasn't one of the things Rurik anticipated in his phrase list, but I decided to forget about spoken as opposed to body language. I laid him on his back, then mounted him.

As I took him into me, I pressed my hands to my breasts, and beckoned him to do likewise, and the pressure of his hands against them was heavenly. As I rode him to another orgasm, I bared my teeth; he took the hint, and bit my nipples hard – knowing he couldn't possibly harm them. I exploded with joy, and he exploded a moment later.

It meant so much to have a *good* man beside me, *inside* me...



What else would he be up for? I pointed between my legs and snacked my lips; he didn't hesitate for a moment before burying his face down there, licking my nether lips and lapping up my juices that flowed abundantly. Had he heard about the Velorian scent of honey and wildflowers, or was he discovering it for himself? Whatever the case, he loved it – he wasn't faking.

There were a lot of Terran men who didn't go for that sort of thing, at least with Terran women, but Igor couldn't himself back. And then he went to work on my clit, sucking it and then biting it with wild abandon; I came again, hard, and screamed with joy. When he raised his head afterwards I could see the pride on his face – the pride of having pleased a woman he knew other men like himself could only have dreamed of. I was giving him the greatest gift a Velorian could bestow.

Turnabout is fair play, but it startled him when I signaled that I wanted to return the favor. I proved it again now with Igor as, ever so gently, I took him into my mouth, licking and sucking him into another orgasm. It didn't do anything for me, although I made it seem as if it had. But sex is about giving as well as receiving, and it felt good to be on the giving end. I had forgotten that on Tazzi, to my ultimate cost, but it came back to me now and my training as a Companion saw me through.

We went through a few more rounds before Igor was completely exhausted. All he wanted after that was sleep, but I held his hand and kissed him again before taking my leave. When he had come, he'd yelled words in Russian that I couldn't understand, but at our parting he had only one.

"Boginya," he whispered.

I learned the next morning from Rurik that "boginya" meant "goddess." He also informed me that our close encounter had accomplished more than I realized.

"Vladimir says it's also heightened Igor's interest in his work," Rurik told me.

"His work?"

"He's been assigned to the company's GAR research. Sometimes it's the young men who come up with the freshest ideas."

So there was a hidden agenda, after all. But it was one that served the interests of Velor and the Terran diaspora and the Scalantrans.

Rurik saw me off to the *Boundless Opportunity*. He saw the glow on my face, and couldn't hide a smirk, knowing how I had spent the previous night. But he couldn't know, and I wasn't about to tell him, how much it had done for me beyond the success of that hidden agenda – how it had helped restore my very soul. I felt that Kevin would have understood. He'd been that kind of man.

* * *

I treasured the memory of Igor, for what it meant to me in overcoming the trauma I had endured on Tazzi. Yet I had to focus on the future. What was happening on Velor? Why had that message crystal – sent from by High Council – also contained a second message about the testimony of Ju'lette and the Tanzrobian? Was there some sort of dispute within the High Council, or between the Council and the Senate – or was it just a matter of the left hand not knowing what the right was doing?

I'd never find out until I reached home.

Meanwhile, between language practice sessions with Kinyam, I was reading up on Scalantran history. I hadn't bothered asking about that much on the way out from Velor with the other Companions all those years ago. They'd talked among themselves, about what kind of luck they'd have with their indentures – I hoped now that the others had fared better than me.

It was all pretty hard to follow, but one thing which stood out was that the trade routes were apparently more complicated than they'd been in centuries past. In the early days, a ship would have exclusive rights to a planet as well as its exports; but as the markets for those products grew, the original ships couldn't visit all the worlds that sought them, so arrangements were made to share some routes – with the original ship receiving a percentage of the profits from products already traded. That increased the pressure for ships without first rights to find products on which they could file TIOs and keep the profits.

There had been a tiny but growing passenger traffic ever since the introduction of Vendorian steel for starship construction. That was how Gazrall had made it to Tazzi. And there was the equally tiny but growing number of Adopts, like Kevin's father – I didn't have any idea where he had come from. It was the same with the holder of my indenture, with the further mystery of how he came by his wealth. There was nothing in the records available on my ship bearing on any of that.

But there was plenty about Seeded worlds. Scalantrans share information about them at Meetpoints. I'd heard about those at the Academy, of course, but never in any great detail. Because I was a Companion-in-training, I knew about the history of the Companions, including the very first – Kalla Zaver'el, who had served on Andros for more than 300 Terran years, as an advisor to its patriarchs, the planetary synod and sundry educational and business institutions even after her indenture had expired.

She was famed on Velor for having defeated an Aurean invasion of the planet a century and a half ago. But, reading the details now, I realized that she couldn't have brought that off single-handed. From her very arrival, she had fostered a scientific and industrial revolution there that eventually led her adopted world into the space age. The enemy had seen only plunder for the taking on Andros; they hadn't foreseen warships

that could take them out – or the mere Terrans trained to fly them and take the fight to the invaders at the Battle of the Triple Moons.

Since then, the Aureans had sought easier conquests, like Nova Iberia, where Ju'lette had served.

Only with the heavy GAR...

I told Kinyam about that, about how Tazzi might be the test of a new strategy by the Empire. About how Gazrall, for all I knew, might be a pawn in an interstellar chess game.

“More than a pawn, I suspect,” Kinyam responded. “Did it ever occur to you that it was awfully convenient for that Aurean scout ship to crash on his planet and leave the GAR available for study?”

It must have been sheer coincidence that her seemingly paranoid thoughts came close to the story I'd told Bensalem, and to the actual truth behind it. But Bensalem was trying to limit any panic, by stripping his account of some of the more shocking details, so I decided to play the skeptic.

“The thing is, he *did* seem to fear the Aureans. And if I hadn't been available after the *Admiral Kirkland* fiasco, he could never have gotten anywhere with it.”

“Perhaps he anticipated that you'd have reason to. Perhaps it was for just such a contingency that he acquired a Velorian.”

“You give him too much credit, and far too much foresight. He wanted me for show. Just another sign of his wealth, if not of his manhood.”

“I think you said you don't know where he came from, or how his father and he came by their wealth in the first place.”

“He never talked about Karl with me, or anyone I knew. But he must have come from a world where it was possible to accumulate such wealth. One as advanced as Tazzi or Selene or Andros.”

“Do you know what ship he and Salomon arrived on?”

“He never talked about that, either. I would never have thought to ask, in any case. It was none of my business as his Companion, and I wouldn't have thought it of any importance at the time.”

“It could be extremely important now. Perhaps I could help. I could put out inquiries. There aren’t that many humans who have taken passage on Scalantran ships.”

“Why would you be interested?”

“Because it may affect our interests, as well as Velor’s. And we need to get back in Velor’s good graces.”

“But these inquiries...”

“Would take a great deal of time. I know. Too long to be of use to you. But perhaps in time to be of use to us.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said sarcastically.

“We have to look out for our own interests. Any way we can. And right now, it’s in our interest that you succeed. It’s just that we have to be prepared for any ... contingencies.

Contingencies. To the Scalantrans, I was a contingency. So be it.

* * *

By the time the *Boundless Opportunity* approached its first jump, I was a familiar figure. I could speak frankly with Trade Captain Farishan about the Companion trade – like the rest of the crew, he had been briefed about my mission.

Training for combat, he said, was even more intense than it had been when I’d gone through the Academy, and nobody pretended any longer that it was only for the protection of the men who would purchase their indentures.

“But this business of the heavy GAR – that’s scary.”

“Scary even to me,” I told him.

There was nothing at all scary about the wormhole passage. It was routine, I was safely within the protective walls of the ship.

Chapter Four

There was disturbing news at the ship’s first stop, and what I learned there right off made me all the more impatient to reach Velor. But business was still business, and there would be a layover of three days for a trade fair.

The planet was called Trpcic, and it had been seeded with a mix of Slavic people from somewhere in Europe – east of the Holy Roman Empire, they told me, which told me nothing. The language was related to the Rus of Selene, but I was advised that I'd have had trouble following it even if I'd taken deepteach in Novy Kyiv.

Not that it mattered. The news had come from Jossalem, resident factor for the planet. It seemed that the Velorian High Council was angry with the Scalantrans. It was insisting on higher down payments for Companions – and having all outgoing ships thoroughly inspected.

It was supposedly all Ju'lette's doing.

The Scalantrans of the *Galactic Roamer*, which, unlike the *Far Wanderer* had a regular trade with Velor, had permitted her to ship out with them in the company of a man from Andros she'd taken a fancy to – and who had, they said, somehow acquired Velorian powers. Not only that, but the ship had also taken Tol'or, an instructor at the Academy on Erin'lah, who deserted his post for the love of the Tanzrobian Zanele.

Galactic Roamer Travel Captain Kordovom had considered it a matter of honor, given that Ju'lette had saved the *Far Wanderer* from the Aureans – and that Zanele had helped save the *Spirit of Youth*. The High Council had seen it differently, as conniving in treason.

Opara, the Factor General on Erin'lah, had been caught in the middle. And the *Far Wanderer* had served as a scapegoat for the Council's wrath, since it had brought Ju'lette to the Velorian system in the first place, and traded with Andros – which had complained about the Aurean menace early on, and shamed Velorian authorities by beating off an actual invasion under the leadership of a freed Companion, after having barred placement of new Companions.

Although the *Far Wanderer* was running late on its trade route because of the unauthorized stop at Erin'lah and all the trouble that followed. Travel Captain Marpolom had decided to make another unauthorized stop at Trpcic to begin spreading word to as many other trade circuits as possible, in hopes of rallying support from their ships that could eventually lead to a united front.

As if the Scalantrans didn't have enough trouble already! Only that wasn't what jumped out at me. It was the matter of Ju'lette's lover. That hadn't been mentioned in

either of the messages that had reached me on Tazzi. Unlike the rest of Marpolom's account, it was unbelievable – and inexplicable.

Could it have something to do with the Galen? But why would the Galen do a personal favor for Ju'lette? Her lover, Tassos by name, had been a "lottery boy," like my own François decades ago, selected by chance from men of each world willing to risk themselves as test subjects for Companions in training. Yet there had been thousands upon thousands of lottery boys over the centuries – from Andros and who knew how many other planets. It just didn't make sense that he would be singled out by the Galen, or even noticed by them – assuming that the Galen had any business on a second-generation seeded world in the first place.

None of that mattered to Jossalem. He was *unattached*, meaning that he wasn't allowed to have a mate, let alone a mate group. I didn't ask how he had come by such a dubious honor and such a small post; it seemed likely that it was punishment. Trpcic itself was a minor planet with a small population and small interstellar trade. Nobody here could afford a Companion.

I told him about my meeting with Bensalem, and he had his own take on the whole TIO thing.

"I once studied under Tithzarem on my youthworld," he said. "The man was old and doddering even then. His title is strictly an honorary one for retirees who have been involved in education on youthworlds, but it seems to have gone to his head."

I just nodded. It was Tithzarem who had first spread word about the new weapon to his fellow Scalantrans – and seen it as a business opportunity. It had all begun with him, and he was the reason I was here.

"We have enough trouble with the Aureans as it is," Jossalem continued. "And what you call the heavy GAR – I can't understand what this Gazrall hoped to gain from it."

"Selling it to other worlds, I would imagine. With or without the cooperation of the Aureans. I'm not sure which. But his hands are dirty, that's for certain."

"Nobody would care terribly if the Aureans moved in here," he complained.

It was disturbing to hear a Scalantran say something so bitter, or to appear to be so resigned to it. It must have to do with his seeming disgrace as much as with the attitude of the natives here, but I wasn't going to pursue that.

I didn't try to reassure him that the Aureans wouldn't consider his world worth the bother; that would have been tactless. I could have said a good deal more, but that would have meant getting onto the personal details. Mercifully, Jossalem didn't seem to show any interest in that sort of thing.

Just in case, I steered the conversation back to Ju'lette, and the advisories sent to the Companions that had reached me on Tazzi. It can't have meant much to him; I was just thinking out loud.

"And finally there's whoever sent that second message to me and all the other Companions," I wound up. "The one unsigned and thus presumably unsanctioned by the High Council. He may be on our side, and perhaps he has allies of his own who at least have open minds."

I could tell none of this meant anything to him; I was wasting my breath.

At that point, we were interrupted by Farishan; something to do with sokols, whatever those were. Jossalem seemed relieved at the chance to be going about his own business instead of listening to mine. While the Factor was away dealing with whatever he was dealing with, I thought again about Gazrall.

Salomon was a common name; so was Karl. No help there. But I'd never heard of anyone else named Gazrall. Neither had anyone on the *Boundless Opportunity*. Nor had Jossalem; I'd asked him, just on the off chance.

"Farishan and I have worked things out," the Factor said when he got back from meeting with the trade captain and the merchants. "No more trouble about sokols and zubors..."

Sokols, it turned out, were hunting birds, apparently brought only to Trpcic by the Seeders. They were in demand on seeded worlds where the nobility set great store by hunting as a pastime, and an emblem of privilege. Commoners weren't allowed to hunt on the lands of the aristocracy, and nearly all the land belonged to the aristocracy. I knew a bit about aristocracy from the history of Tazzi, but the kind he talked about didn't

have anything to do with a church. Anyway, the point was that the export market for the birds was limited to aristocracies.

“Sokols, like any birds can breed quickly, so the merchants here know the market for them would vanish if they couldn’t keep sending only males. But we agreed to handle breeding pairs of zubors – wild cattle that were rare on Earth and don’t seem to have been brought anywhere else by the Seeders. One of their quirks.”

“Oh,” I said, not terribly interested. “And I suppose the sokols will be used to hunt the zubors?”

“Hardly. Zubors are too big and too slow for that kind of sport, although they can be dangerous, with their males’ huge horns. That’s where what aristocrats call the ‘sport’ comes in, hard as that may be for you and I to understand. The sokols are used to spot and track game that is more fleet of foot. Of that, this world has nothing to offer.”

Jossalem paused for a moment.

“Speaking of males, that man over there is the son of the trader who deals in both sokols and zubors.”

I glanced in the direction he indicated.

“We have told him that you are... unencumbered. As he indeed is. His name is Boleslav Zupan.”

“**Oh**,” I said, terribly interested.

And I realized how much I needed a break. I was more comfortable about my needs now; somehow, I had made my inner peace with the memory of Kevin. I still had a debt to pay him, but there was another way to pay it, and that now awaited me only at Velor...

If Scalantrans were capable of smirking, I imagined, Jossalem would have done so. But he and Manesha could surely understand the irony of their humor of playing matchmakers to a Terran and a Velorian. And even providing protection – a gold necklace Farishan just “happened” to have brought from the ship, and which she took a break from the trade talks to bestow on me.

“He understands about that,” the trade captain said.

“And I think I can trust you *not* to do whatever Ju’lette did with Tassos,” added Jossalem.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Marpolom must have gotten that wrong. We *can’t* do what you say he told you about that man. The Galen made us what we are, out of ordinary Terrans, and only the Galen are capable of doing that.”

“Kordovom supposedly had it from Ju’lette herself.”

“And Marpolom had it only second-hand. Maybe the Velorians made it all up to justify making things harder for you. I don’t suppose they had any idea where Ju’lette went.”

“Word had it that she and Tassos were headed for Madstop.”

Skietra! Would the Aureans have found them there? Had I unwittingly put them in harm’s way? But I couldn’t let on, so I quickly turned it into a joke.

“A likely spot for a honeymoon. I think *I’ve* had it,” I teased him.

* * *

What Boleslav lacked in experience he made up for in enthusiasm – and, of course, stamina. Like Igor, he didn’t last long the first time, but I got off just the same; I let him know that he had nothing to be ashamed of. And he was a quick study...

For me, it was a diversion, a chance to take my mind off all the thoughts that had troubled me from the outset of my journey – thoughts that had nothing to do with Kevin, and which had been worsened by the news Jossalem had shared about developments on Velor. And there was something Boleslav told me that might bear on my mission – and on the fate of Tazzi, if fate allowed me to return there.

In our afterglow, he’d showed he had a sense of humor, and more. He could speak Scalantran, even if his words of passion had been in his native tongue.

“Do Velorian women have a man in every port?” he asked.

“Only if they’re retired Companions. Like me.”

That drew a blank stare. I had to explain about Companions; on a planet like this, people didn’t know much about them, or have need to.

“Guess it’ll have a long wait for the next time you hit Trpcic,” he said.

“I’m sure you’ll find other diversions, maybe even—”

“My father wants to choose for me. A business alliance. But I don’t think I could abide it. I don’t think love should be a matter of business, as it is with your indentures.”

“It isn’t that bad,” I said, not very convincingly. “We live much longer away from home. Even 100 Terran years isn’t much for us. And some of us do find love as Companions.”

“I don’t think you’re one of them. Can you say you’re sorry he died?”

He must have just *assumed* that – how else could a Companion be freed of her indenture? But for a second I was thinking about Kevin – so flustered that I corrected myself out loud.

“Died? Oh, you mean Gazrall.”

Skietra! I wasn’t supposed to have mentioned his name.

“Gazrall? The name sounds familiar.”

“You know about Tazzi?”

I shouldn’t have mentioned that, either, but somehow felt compelled.

“No. It’s just that I’ve heard that name or a similar one, only I can’t remember when. Maybe it was when I was a kid. Maybe it will come to me.”

But it didn’t. Not that night.

It left me frustrated, thinking of how little I had known about him back on Tazzi. The Scalantrans had prepared me for my indenture, and for the world itself, but not for *him*. Now I felt a gnawing anxiety about the chances of my mission – and a growing obsession about the man responsible for it all, a man I had once trusted if never truly loved, a man who even now might be bringing tyranny or destruction to an entire world...

* * *

At the time I left, my indenture to Salomon Gazrall had lasted for some 20 Terran years, the equivalent of 27 on Tazzi; yet I had felt a greater bond to my homeworld. Perhaps that wasn’t the same for all Companions – perhaps they found love and loyalty rather than mere duty. But it was hard to find love or feel loyalty towards a man about whom I knew little, and who shared practically nothing.

The Scalantrans had given me a historical briefing along with deepteach in the English language after selling me to him. About how the planet had been seeded with people from England after it was conquered by some king named William who was a Norman. The Normans were also trying to conquer another country called Italia, and

one of their Italian vassal princes, Amico Tazzi, had been visiting England when the Seeders showed up. The Seeders grabbed mostly peasant serfs and lowly freemen called churls, who were about to be slain wholesale because their earls had rebelled against this William. They also took the country priests, who brought their religion to the new world. Tazzi just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, but he was the only man of “noble” rank in the first wave of settlers, so he got to reign over the colony, and the planet ended up named for him – at first it was called Tazzi’s World, but after a few generations nearly everyone called it simply Tazzi.

Only he didn’t have any children. The priests, who were the only people with any real education (among other things, that meant they could speak, read and write in a church language called Latin) took charge and established a Christian autarchy. They began to style themselves bishops and enlist the common people to build monumental churches and monasteries dedicated to sainted archbishops of a city back in England called Canterbury. Yet, as with all ruling elites, power had gone to their heads – and while claiming to have forsaken worldly pleasures they waxed fat off the land and its ordinary inhabitants.

That had finally led, in recent times, to a popular rebellion. The commoners were increasingly educated themselves, and had begun to question the Church and its teachings. They also knew that Tazzi had become increasingly prosperous, thanks to the trade with the Scalantrans, but that they were denied a fair share of the wealth. When the church began to torture and burn its critics as heretics or worse, there was a planet-wide uprising. 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. Out of it had come a liberated, hedonistic society, where rapid scientific and technological progress had produced the Tazzi of today – as modern a seeded planet as they come. As modern in its own way as Selene or distant Andros.

The Scalantrans had wanted me to feel at home there. From their briefing, I knew about how the government center had once been religious center, and that the Curia Populi (People’s Council in Latin) met in what had previously been a cathedral. Things like that.

None of which were of any practical use to me, at least as a Companion.

Gazrall wasn't native to Tazzi, I already knew. He and his father had come from elsewhere. His father Karl had died a few years before my arrival, and his mother, if she lived, had not come with them – although they did bring other men who made up his inner circle and spoke the same language – a language I was not invited to learn. They dealt with me in English; like me, they must have been deeptaught. Only, they spoke to me only about routine matters, and treated me like some ordinary servant – a thrall, as they'd say here.

I couldn't complain about my treatment in bed. His performance was adequate for a man of about 50, and a Velorian can always make the most of a man in pursuing her own pleasure. But there was never any intimacy between us; there even were times he had me summoned to his bedchamber, and I would arrive there to find him still engaged in conversation with his inner circle in that strange language. I might as well have been part of the furniture until he dismissed them and signaled his readiness.

That was all before he lost his manhood, for lack of medical attention – which was strange because he funded medical research and yet avoided doctors – unless his inner circle included one. I could never understand why he didn't opt for restorative surgery. I could still pursue my own pleasure, but I had to fantasize about the Velorian men (and women) back home – even the lottery boy who saw to in my training on Erin'lah in safe sex. When Gazrall had automatons built to service me, he expected me to be grateful, and I made a show of that. He'd check up from time to time to make sure they'd been used and abused, as if it were a point of honor for him.

We spent more time together thereafter in public than in private; if I could no longer be his sexual partner, I could be his showpiece – the emblem of his wealth. He would take me with him to Cathedral Square to watch and be watched at sessions of the Curia Populi, and to visit the ministries with which he did business. Or rather, with which his *businesses* did business.

He and his father had brought their wealth with them from wherever they'd lived before emigrating here. There weren't that many Terrans who could afford to travel between the stars, and I knew they couldn't be adopts – Terrans who took service with

the Scalantrans to help them with trade and diplomacy on seeded worlds: they got to see a lot, but they never got rich.

I never had a clue as to how the Gazralls transferred their riches to Tazzi – credits with the Scalantrans, most likely, but it might have cargo of something at once rare and compact enough to be shipped across the vastness of interstellar space and then converted to pounds or bank credits here.

That had been before my time, and they didn't talk about it – at least not with me. But their investments had already multiplied, or Gazrall couldn't have afforded to my contract. They had since grown by leaps and bounds, and were concentrated in the most lucrative industries for either the planetary market or exports – in some cases both, as with native spirits, exotic foodstuffs, Cheraz furs and art works.

Of course, there were the planetoid mines. They supplied a lot of high-grade iron and other metals, but rumor had it that the miners were looking for Xintanite, the key ingredient in Vendorian steel. The Scalantrans had it, but they had to pay dearly for it. Maybe Gazrall wanted to get in on the market for spacecraft. Groundside, it would be a godsend to the flitter industry, which he'd built up from a modest start. Where he had gotten the thread he gave me for my necklace, I had no idea. But if he could find a way to produce it in the Tazzian system.... Could *that* be what the Aureans were after? Vendor had refused to sell it to them, and so had the Scalantrans.

Of his business, I had known practically everything. But of the man himself, I had known nothing – except that he was obsessed with wealth and power. There was nothing I could have done about that, without breaking my indenture. From the High Council's point of view, he would have been only another a petty tyrant on a distant world. There had been no way I could invoke the Exception, as Ju'lette had... Not until that terrible day at the end, at St. Bertwald's...

I was free of him at last, but I could never be free of what had befallen Kevin. I could never be truly free again unless I could bring the truth to Velor – and bring the might of Velor to bear.

I still felt a gnawing anxiety about the chances of my mission – and a growing obsession about the man responsible for it all, a man I had once trusted if never truly

loved, a man who even now might be bringing tyranny or destruction to an entire world...

* * *

I spent the next day with Boleslav, who told me more, as best he could about the planet's exports. He introduced me to a trained sokol, signaling it to alight on my arm, and even let me feed it treats.

"They take a great deal of training," he explained. "We actually send them as hatchlings, under suspended animation, along with training manuals that the Scalantrans have translated into the local languages. Some of our customers have had to learn the hard way that it's no easy task. But our contracts don't allow them to hold us responsible for their own failures. And they *do* learn."

Zubors were indeed much larger than the cattle I was used to on Tazzi. They might be exotic elsewhere, but here their meat was a staple, and one of the basic ingredients for some kinds of klobása – sausages made from meat and secret blends of herbs and spices.

"There's a market for those on more advanced worlds, and we're hoping to increase that," he said. And the Scalantrans were playing fair, seeing a mutual interest in exotic foodstuffs. "Even I don't know the recipes. But if somebody on some other planet claims to have duplicated them, they impose sanctions. It's good business for them as well as us."

That evening he offered her a klobása made from something he called swamp hog meat. It didn't sound promising, but it turned out to be especially delicious.

"I don't think anyone could pirate it, because they don't have swamp hogs anywhere else that I know of. But I think we'd have to come up with some other name for them if we wanted to sell them."

A pleasant evening concluded with my invitation for him to put the "sausage" between his legs to good use – which he did. Several times.

We were relaxing, in a state of bliss, not a care in the world. And then...

Of a sudden, he broke off, and his expression changed.

"I remember! How I heard that name!"

Gazrall, he meant, but he said it had been Garzarolli, the ruling family on a world called Himmelsreich that was once a market for sokols. Only there had been a revolution two generations ago, and the commoners who ruled the planet now and had renamed it Freiwelt, shunned aristocratic sports like hunting.

“I’ll have to ask my father,” he said.

Jonasz Zupan was old enough to remember the trade with Himmelsreich, and how it had ended – at least, how it had been told him by the predecessor of Farishan – this was before Jossalem had been assigned here.

“For a time after the Revolution, people there hated the Scalantrans – for having dealt with the ruling nobles. And they certainly didn’t want our sokols, or any other luxuries associated with their former rulers. Farishan thinks they might be interested in zubors – he’ll have to check at the next Meetpoint; Freiwelt isn’t on the *Boundless Opportunity’s* route, and they’d have to work something out with the *Merchanters’ Luck*.”

“What about the planet itself?”

“Its name means Free World,” he said. “But it was originally Himmelsreich, or Heaven Kingdom. Supposedly the people settled there thought at first they were being taken straight to Heaven by the Seeders. At least, that’s the story their rulers told the Scalantrans.”

Those people came from a place on Earth called Tyrol, in a remote corner of a holy empire where there were high mountains with snow on top – those were rare, it seemed, on Himmelsreich itself. That sort of detail meant nothing to me and mattered less. Anyway, it didn’t make any sense; why should an empire be holy? Did snow-capped mountains have anything to do with it?

Anyway, the aristocrats there seemed to think they were favored by their god, although most Terrans in the same situation were disabused of their faith by the experience of abduction. Or maybe they didn’t believe it themselves and just pretended they did in order to lord it over the common people – the Seeders, as usual, hadn’t been choosy; they’d just grabbed up everybody they could in the towns they’d raided.

“The Garzarolli dynasty and the nobles could take all the food they wanted and gorge themselves; they could take any women they wanted, use them and throw them away. They had all the weapons, and the commoners had none. The nobles owned all

the land, and the commoners owned none. The few lived in palaces while the many lived in hovels. They had barely enough to eat, while their lords hunted game animals – some from other worlds – for sport. Sometimes they'd even hunt commoners who'd offended them, for sport."

Like the rule of the Church on Tazzi, I thought. Only even worse.

"One thing they had never wanted was a Companion. The ruling princes could commandeer any women they desired, and they certainly didn't need protection."

"More like the common people needed protection from them."

"Only it seems there may have been more to it than that. On the first visit of the *Merchanters' Luck* after the Revolution, the new government told the Scalantrans that Freiwelt could use a Companion after all."

"But who could afford one, of there were no more wealthy nobles?"

"Nobody. The planet paid for her."

I was stunned.

"But *how*?"

"They traded the Scalantrans luxuries left by the nobles – gold and other precious metals, jewelry and gems, fabrics and foodstuffs and spices unique to their world, works of art created there, exotic game animals originally imported from here and elsewhere. People there didn't need them any more; They wanted to produce the necessities for a growing population. The Scalantrans wanted to get back in their good graces, and cut a good deal – only there was more to it than that."

"Like, *why* would a planet buy a Companion?"

"For *protection*. There had been mysterious strangers living with the Garzarollis. The common people knew about them from reports of servants at the royal palace, but never had any idea who they were or where they came from. The Scalantrans can't have known about them – only the nobles had contact with the traders. But it turned out they had a spaceship; it was seen landing and taking off during the final assault on the capital, and the Garzarollis were never seen again, dead or alive. When the Scalantrans came again to trade, they said it hadn't been one of theirs."

I know what's coming next, I thought, but let Jonasz continue.

“They thought the Garzarollis’ saviors must have been the Aureans. They had to explain about the Aureans and the Empire; that was the other reason they offered an especially good deal for a Companion, saying the defense of the planet was in their mutual interest.”

“So Aman’t’hula is a warrior, and only a warrior?”

“Oh, she has her needs, just like you. But they’re served by a lottery that helps fund the government.”

I’d heard of that happening on other worlds.

“Terran males are the same everywhere,” I quipped.

“So are Velorian females,” Jonasz countered.

By the time it came to ship out with the Scalantrans, I’d had time for another round with Boleslav. It left me good memories to carry back to the *Boundless Opportunity*; I might not find any other such diversions short of Velor itself.

Farishan had checked the ship’s records, and confirmed Jonasz’ story, giving me independent evidence of the Gazrall connection to the Aureans. But there was still an anomaly here: the very name of the weapon, the Garzoldan Assault Rifle. It sounded as if it had a connection to the family, but if so it must have been invented later elsewhere – there would never have been a successful Revolution on Himmelsreich if the rulers there had possessed it.

Had the *Merchanters’ Luck* ever reported about any of this to Velor? Apparently not, if it was news when Ju’lette brought word of the GAR.

Chapter Five

After the excitement at Trpcic, it was mostly boredom – and increasing frustration – as the *Boundless Opportunity* continued its journey. There were still stops to come at Irukan and Estor before we reached Velor – and Travel Captain Manesha wasn’t about to skip them to save me a few months, even if my mission was urgent.

“What with the troubles a few years ago over the *Far Wanderer* and the *Galactic Roamer*, we can’t afford to give the Velorians any cause for complaint,” she told me. “Moreover, we are expected to pick up new lottery boys on both worlds, in addition to the usual trade goods.”

The trade goods were mostly technological specialties Velor had yet to produce for itself, but also included exotic foods – and even art objects. Nedra Jahr-El, one of the Companions on Irukan, was indentured to Eksayar Khosrau, owner of an electronics business – which designed and manufactured, among other things, scoreboards with elaborate video displays for Scrumbles. I didn't expect to meet her; anyway, there wouldn't be any point to it – all she'd know was what the High Council had told her, even if that included the second message without a seal.

Not that I didn't welcome the chance to go outside for the trade fair; being cooped up on the ship had been hard to take, once there was nothing more to learn from Manesha or Farishan or even the historian Rumata. Only, I kept my distance from the lottery boys, both there and back aboard the *Boundless Opportunity* – they were off limits to me, just as they were to Nedra. But I did get in some flying, just take a better look at the world, one I'd never seen before and would doubtless never see again.

Irukan was seeded from some ancient country on Earth called Parsi, but that had been long ago, centuries before Velor itself was seeded, and little or nothing of the old culture remains – it's an ultra high-tech world now. And yet most of the planet is given over to forests; the people live mainly in linear cities along transcontinental highways. Computer systems process data on food and other resources to rationalize production and distribution. Machines do most of the work, leaving humans to devote themselves to cultural pursuits like singing, dancing, and even recreational flying with artificial wings – forget about flitters! It was startling to have company in the air...

It was startling to some of the company too, and one of the flyers lost control of his wings – I had to take hold of him and carry him down to the ground as gently as I could. A flying woman – his wife or girlfriend, I suppose – followed us. They both yelled at me, though I couldn't understand a word they were saying. We landed in a forest clearing, and after a few moments they both took off – leaving me feeling embarrassed. But at least I got to see the wonder of the ancient forest on such a modern world.



Whoever the flyers were, they hadn't lodged a complaint – at least, none that got back to the Scalantrans at the trade fair. I suppose they must have realized *what* I was, even if they didn't know *who* I was – and made allowances for an ignorant Outworlder, no matter if that outworlder was a Velorian.

Just to be on the safe side, I didn't make any further aerial excursions, even though I knew enough by then to be on the lookout and avoid unwanted close encounters. On the ground, there weren't any opportunities for close encounters of the kind I did want. Just the routine, and boring, sights of the trade fair. Until it was time to return to the Boundless Opportunity – Estor awaited and then, finally, Velor – well, Erin'lah, to be precise.

* * *

Estor came and went.

It was an aquatic planet, where most of the people lived on floating islands. Seafaring came as naturally to them as surface travel anywhere else. Most of it was commercial, for fisheries management and harvesting, but there was also a tradition sailing just for the sake of sailing. The fanciful designs of recreational yachts had caught the attention of the Scalantrans early on – and now custom versions commanded high

prices on other worlds. They had to, inasmuch as they were as hard to transport as space shuttles.

One of the jobs of the Companion there, Rhea Nar-Zen, was to help load them aboard without damage. But since Velor was the next and last stop on this run, and had no use for boats of any kind, her services were not required, and I had no occasion to call on her. I did get a chance to fly again, without running into any competition, and the floating islands – on which most of the homes were grown rather than built – were like nothing I'd ever seen, or even known of.

I didn't know the language there, any more than at Irukan. It might have been educational to speak with the natives, especially those who had been engineered with gills, to live below as well as above water. That sort of thing was controversial, Farishan told me, and – unlike the yachts – it was not advertised abroad.

None of that mattered any longer. What mattered was how I was going to tell my story when I reached my homeworld, and how it was going to be received.

I already knew that the High Council hadn't been honest with us about Ju'lette and her appeal. Could I afford to be any more honest? And yet there was the man who had sent that second message. Him I could trust, I felt. But how could I find him, and was he able to act, or even to intercede for me?

Part Two: Truth and Consequences

Chapter Six

Landing on Erin'lah was a matter of routine. The Scalantran trading compound was unchanged since I'd left. I didn't know about the training grounds – they weren't visible from here. While Farishan set up shop, we were approached by Opara. She was still Factor General here.

She was surprised to see Manesha and Kinyam accompanying me, and further surprised when I introduced myself, and them, in her own language. After which I could not wait another moment to explain our business.

“I am responding to a general message from the High Council regarding any new weapons deployed by the Aureans,” I said. “I have actually encountered such a weapon on Tazzi; it is extremely dangerous – even to Velorians. Bensalem, your counterpart on Selene, has seen the evidence, and seen fit to revoke his advisory that the Scalantrans should attempt to exploit it for commercial purposes. I also regret to inform you that the authorities on Tazzi have arrested Vaharem and his mate group, doubtless to prevent them from revealing what they know.”

“We can testify that engineers in our employ on Selene have analyzed the nature of the new weapon, a larger and more powerful version of the Garzoldan Assault Rifle, and that we have brought an accurate report of their findings, along with copies of the GAR chips themselves,” Manesha said.

“And we both trust Vespvr’s account of events on Tazzi, which she has risked her life to bring to the attention of the High Council,” Kinyam added.

Opara was stunned, to say the least, but not very hopeful.

“You may face a skeptical reception,” she warned. “The last Companion to make such a claim was unable to substantiate it, and she caused us no end of trouble, having fled here with a lover, a Tanzrobian friend and one of the instructors here after the High Council dismissed her story.”

“We have heard about that from the *Far Wanderer*,” Manesha said. “Even before that, an unsigned account Ju’lette’s hearing before the Council was received by Vespvr in the same message crystal as the Council’s official advisory.”

“That is why I knew it was imperative to bring the chips,” I said; and added, with a sigh, “If only we knew who sent that second message...”

“We aren’t privy to the affairs of the Council,” Opara advised.

“But the *Far Wanderer* has been taking pains to make Velorians and Scalantrans elsewhere privy to the situation and, hopefully, to rally support,” Manesha said.

“Much good that does us here,” Opara complained, “There’s been hell to pay for what the *Galactic Roamer* did. They’ll never be allowed to call here again; you can count on that. For our sake, for the sake of all Scalantrans, you had better have truth on your side.”

“We have truth,” Kinyam said. “It is part of our own history now, and it is my duty to record that history faithfully.”

“Given the low regard in which your people are held at present, I doubt that your word would be taken. In any case, you have no standing to testify, and since the case could be presented only on Velor itself, it would be impossible for you to do so.”

Manesha nodded to me.

“So it’s all up to you.”

“I am ready to face the High Council,” I said. “The only question is whether the Council is ready to accept the truth, in face of the evidence I will submit. We have been given reason to believe that the Council has deliberately misrepresented the situation, to the Scalantrans and to the Companions.”

“My only concern is how this will impact the Scalantrans, and my only authority is in regards to their interests. I can send an advisory calling for an Interdict against Tazzi, but my position precludes me from having any contact with the High Council.”

“So how do I contact them? If they wouldn’t listen to Ju’lette; is there any way to for me to get their attention?”

“Your only contact here would be Jes’kor, superintendent of the Academy. His uncle Koro’lat is Senior High Councillor. On the face of it, you could hardly ask for a better introduction.”

Opara paused for a moment.

“On the other hand, he shares his uncle’s antipathy towards us, and likewise his skepticism about the Aurean menace; it will take you a good deal of convincing.”

“Does he know enough about engineering to judge the evidence?”

“I wouldn’t know. I gather he’s not too bright about technology... and other things. And... Well, if I were you, I’d make backup copies of your evidence, just in case...”

“We’ve already thought of that,” Manesha said. “And although we’re supposed to remain here only for the trading negotiations, limited as those may as things now stand, we don’t intend to leave without at least having made every effort to fulfill the mission that has brought Vespyr here.”

* * *

It took me a while to reach the training ground, given that I couldn't fly here, and going by leaps and bounds would feel rather silly – and look sillier to the candidates and the lottery boys – if I came down in or near one of the sex shacks.

I could still remember the shacks from when I had been in training. They were more to protect the modesty of the lottery boys than our own – although they might occasionally conceal an unfortunate fatal accident if things went wrong.

I wished I could have brought Kinyam with me, but that would have been inviting trouble. I had called ahead, but been told that Jes'kor was busy. I knew where the office was, however – just where it had always been, before he had been appointed to head it. I hadn't mentioned my name when I called, knowing that he might not want to see me – but I wanted to see him.

"You are out of uniform," he complained when I made my presence known. And indeed, I was wearing just a chemise I had picked up on Selene, and which had served me well since – it was modest, but easy to remove when the occasion called for it.

"My name is Vespvr Tal'Esta," I said. "I have invoked Exception to my indenture on Tazzi on the grounds that my master is allied with the Aureans. Furthermore, I have proof that the Empire has developed a new weapon, and am duty bound to report this to the High Council as called for in the Exploratory Investigation advisory that was sent by message crystal to all Companions."

"How did you come to Erin'lah? And why are you *here*? Why hasn't the Council been informed?"

"I came with the *Boundless Opportunity*."

Jes'kor looked puzzled, and quickly checked his comp.

"That ship doesn't even stop at Tazzi," he said a few moments later.

"I boarded at Selene. After flying the wormhole from Tazzi."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"Look up my indenture. It was sold to Salomon Gazrall on Tazzi."

He did some more checking.

"Then you can't be who you say you are."

“My identity can easily be vouched for by my lifecypher records. And if Kal-Entor still teaches here, I expect he will remember me – he will certainly remember certain incidents of my combat training... among other things.”

“He is busy training a candidate today, like our other instructors,” Jes’kor said. “There is an increasing demand for Companions... But assuming that you *are* telling the truth, or at least the truth as you see it, what would you have the Council do?”

“Put Velor on a war footing. Find a way to counter the Aureans’ latest weapon – an enhanced version of the Garzoldan Assault Rifle that can kill Companions, take out starships in an instant and even devastate entire planets. As things stand, nothing can stop them – they can conquer worlds at will. Tanzrobi was just the beginning. And all they had then was the original GAR.”

“You have been misinformed,” Jes’kor snapped. “I have it on good authority that it was only a dissident group that attacked Tanzrobi. Elements of the same group raided a world called Nova Iberia.”

“What good authority?”

“A prisoner taken by the Scalantrans and brought here. He told them a different story, and that story was believed by another Companion who broke her indenture and then engaged in scandalous behavior of which I’d rather not speak. But he confided to *us*, about the perfidy of the Scalantrans as well as the rogue Aureans – who are out to make trouble for Velor *and* the Empire, which learned its lesson at Andros and has no ambitions beyond its home region. One of their leaders is a Prime – Mal’kar Klen.”

I couldn’t say another word.

It was all coming back to me. Not just my horror but my shame. How could I tell anyone here that I had been seduced by the very same narrative, and by the very man who brought it with him to the world that I was sworn to defend against the Empire?

It had been born of need, a need that I felt could be satisfied only by a supremis. I remembered my training on Erin’lah with a lottery boy, François had known in his head I was no threat to his manhood, and yet in his body... It would be the same with other Terrans as a Companion. I’d practiced with dummies; I’d learned how to control my strength, even under gold, and I proved it with him. And it would be worth it, in service to Velor.

But Gazrall had hardly been worth it, even I the early years. Kevin had been, but that violated my contract even if my relationship with him had been justified only by my sense of mission regarding the GAR. And when I realized that my duty as a Velorian was to bring word to Velor, I'd had to give him up – let him go into hiding... with Jana. I'd felt a twinge of jealousy there, but it was for the best. How could I have known that she would betray him... or that her treachery would echo mine?

It was my aching need that Mal'kar understood, that let him draw me into what I took for an affair of the heart and body, an affair that would lead me to believe his every word as well as his every touch when we fucked our brains out.

He was so beautiful – and irresistible. I, who had been trained to be worshipped by Terrans, was drawn to worship this living god. I, who had worn gold for the sake of Terrans, and taken pride in how I could drive them mad with lust, could come to him totally naked and let him drive me mad with lust. To feel his cock inside me, to feel him explode inside me more powerfully than a bomb...

I could let loose with him, and he could let loose with me. Neither of us needed to hold anything back. We were free to be ourselves, and that freedom overwhelmed me. Nothing else mattered. For his sake, I could forget everyone and everything else. Only, without realizing it until too late, he seduced my mind as well as my body; he made me believe that he sought the triumph of good for everyone and everything, that together we could create a new utopia. His words were so beautiful: words of about a Third Force in the Galaxy to protect other worlds against any and all oppressors. We could do it, slowly but surely, beginning with just one world. Gazrall could be eased out of power, and a new day would dawn; together we would master the GAR, but use it only for our righteous cause. The Aureans would leave us be – they had given up their imperial ambitions.

*Why travel all the way to Velor when we could usher in the millennium where we were? As Mal'kar had enlightened me, so would we enlighten others... including Kevin. I looked forward to bringing him into the roundtable we would create... until the day of reckoning came, the day that Mal'kar told me that he had located my former lover and taken the “appropriate action” against him for the good of the cause... **our** cause.*

His cause. No longer mine. My eyes had finally been opened.

My shame and rage had come back to me in a flash.
In another flash, I lost it. Lost it utterly.

Chapter Seven

Jes'kor wasn't seriously injured.

But only because several nearby training officers – all experienced in combat – came to his aid and pulled me off him.

I ended up chained in gold, then safely shackled in Vendorian steel and locked in a storage building. One of the trainers glared at me as he shut the door.

“You're even crazier than the first one!” he yelled. “But this time, the High Council will do its duty. You will not escape its judgment.”

At that moment, I couldn't have argued with him. I was cursing myself inwardly for letting my rage overpower me – a rage I had suppressed during my journey here, a rage I imagined I had put behind me, a rage that had put an end to my mission... I had failed the people of Tazzi, failed all the worlds and peoples threatened by the Aureans, failed the Companions who would fall victim to the GAR... and I had failed Kevin. I was all alone with my guilt. I had nobody to blame but myself. I was still alive, but Mal'kar had won – he was now victorious from the grave...

Or so I thought.

* * *

I expected only the worst: my first real visitor – the officers who checked up on me several times a day hardly counted – would be the man assigned to convey me to Velor to face my trial before the Council. And that was exactly what happened – except for what happened next.

“Junior Councillor Dar'yul El-Mir,” he introduced himself. “I am here on behalf of the High Council, to investigate your case and transport you to Velor for your hearing.”

I couldn't think of anything to say – certainly nothing that he'd want to hear. Only then *he* had something more to say.

“I suspect from my intelligence that you already know how it went with Ju'lette.”

He must have seen from the shock on my face that this was the last thing I would have expected.

“You!” I exclaimed. “The second message!”

“But don’t breathe a word of that. As far as Koro’lat and his allies know, the only message sent to Companions was the general advisory, which remains the only official word of the Council. I can’t say what others may have made of that second message, and you are thus far the only one to have responded to it.”

He paused for a moment.

“And for that, you’ve become a killer Velorian? Would-be, at least? I’d hoped for better, as you can well understand. And while Jes’kor would have been no loss, you’ve set yourself up as a madwoman – how *could* you?”

I couldn’t help bursting out the source of my rage.

“He murdered a man I—”

“Jes’kor? Are you *that* crazy?”

“*Mal’kar!* The Aurean Velor trusted with the fate of Tazzi! The man who nuked an entire commune to eliminate the Tazzian who’d learned the secret of the GAR! The man who...”

I suddenly realized that I couldn’t share my personal involvement with Kevin, or my betrayal of him. What Mal’kar had done to his innocent victims on Tazzi, his hidden agenda as an imperial agent – these were the facts the High Council had to know. Even more important than that, however, was the true story of the GAR. I’d have to begin with that.

“Are you all right?” Dar’yul asked.

“No, I am **not** all right, and neither would you be, if you’d been through what I’ve been through, and know what I know.”

“But we have to convince the Council otherwise. And that’s going to be difficult.”

“Not as difficult as you think. We have... well, had... a working GAR, a heavy GAR – a Velorian-killer and even a world-killer. And we have brought the design for it. And copies of the GAR control chips. On the *Boundless Opportunity*.”

“Can you take me there?”

“Of course. But it will look better if *you* take *me*. As part of your investigation.”

“Koro’lat can hardly object to that, since he himself sent me here. But I think I need to learn more here first.”

“The Scalantrans can vouch for me, and offer proof of my story.”

“If anyone here wonders why I am visiting the them, I can truthfully tell them that I am gathering evidence for your case.”

“They can’t come to Velor to testify, of course.”

“That was the problem with the Scalantrans who brought Ju’lette, as you must know from the transcript of her hearing – and Koro’lat and his allies refused to credit the testimony of the Tanzrobian Zanele, who had accompanied her.”

“Indeed.”

“She was involved in a scandalous relationship with a sex instructor here. That certainly didn’t help.”

“We heard about that on the way here. The *Galactic Roamer* has been spreading the story far and wide – about how they arranged for Ju’lette and Tassos and Tol’or and Zanele to flee on their ship. They considered it a matter of honor, as Ju’lette had saved them from the Enemy Aureans, and Zanele had helped save another ship.”

“You’re up to speed, I see. But we have to prepare for what comes next.”

* * *

The meeting at Opara’s office was supposed to be a mere formality, but turned out to be more than that.

Dar’yul recorded vid depositions from Manesh and Kinyam, identifying the cubes given into their ship’s custody on Selene – with control chips for the GAR itself and data chips for the tests that Kevin and I had carried out. The latter were originals, of course, but the former were duplicates, and included vids from the engineers at Veliky Vagon Tvorets that explained their findings, and certified that the chips themselves were exact copies of those I had brought from Tazzi, and had been produced in my presence.

The travel captain also identified a copy of the advisory from Bensalem, signed by the factor general himself, warning his fellow Scalantrans against trying to exploit the GAR for profit. Kinyam could testify only about what I had told him, but shared his own suspicions about how a working GAR had come to Tazzi – it would be up to me to share my mine about Gazrall with the High Council. But that would be of little import compared to the evidence of the chips.

All very cut and dried. Until Opara weighed in.

“You clearly have enough to convince the High Council, and to have the matter brought before the Senate. But what can the Senate *do* to deal with the Aurean threat?”

There was a moment of hesitation on Dar’yul’s part. Then....

“We can now break their monopoly on the GAR, and make that known to them,” he said. “We can make it known that we can defend Velor against any attack, and set warships with GARs to guard our wormhole. But we may also have to develop a fleet of GAR-armed warships that can reach the Aureans’ own worlds, and deter them with the threat of their own destruction.”

“And what of *our* worlds, and *our* ships?”

“They too could be armed.”

“We are *traders*, we have *always* been traders. If we become anything else, if we are even *seen* as anything else... It was bad enough that Bensalem was tempted by the idea of trading in weapons of mass destruction. We convinced him to reverse himself, but it was a close call – and it will take years for all our ships to get the message. I can only hope that they all heed it.”

“We could supply Companions who—”

“Who would be just as vulnerable as the ships themselves.”

“As would those assigned to planets,” I added.

“Koro’lat didn’t mention it at the hearing for Ju’lette, but in private conversation he has recognized the need for defense measures, including warships. But to pay for all this, he is convinced that we must redouble the trade in Companions – no world should be left without them, or limited to just one of them. They can be armed with light GARs and the planetary military forces with heavy GARs. Nothing short of that can be of any avail.”

“Will my fellow Velorians avail themselves of the chance to be annihilated?”

“They won’t have any choice in the matter. Conscription.”

The first Companions had been conscripts in all but name, given away by their fathers or the priests. It was before those first companions discovered that how powerful they became powerful outside the Velorian gold field and, much later, that they could live on and on – far past the time they would have died at home. But freedom for them, Dar’yul said, had become a challenge for the High Council.

Being indentured as a Companion for a mere century came to seem a blessing, compared to a short life back home under the domination of men, for it would lead to the freedom to live and love as they saw fit...

“Will they make the indentures indefinite, too?”

“I don’t think Koro’lat would go that far. They have to feel they have a *chance*.”

“A chance of what?”

“A chance at freedom and near-immortality versus a chance of being cut down in the prime of life. It should all balance out in their minds. That’s how Koro’lat sees it. How the conscripts will see it...”

“Won’t it take a vote of the Senate to authorize conscription?”

“Indeed. And for all the military measures to be funded by the indentures – which may be assigned to planets as such, rather than wealthy individuals.”

“Until Gazrall, nobody on Tazzi was wealthy enough.”

“There are doubtless other worlds that would tax their own people for protection, or the illusion of protection, once word spreads about the GARs.”

“And it might all be in vain. There are no easy answers. Perhaps none at all. But I can put the issue to the High Council *and* the Senate when they gather with the Priests at the Shrine for the Remembrance.”

The Shrine...

“I can leave you here, on condition of good behavior, while I return home with the evidence I collect here. You’d have to be jailed if you came with me.”

“They surely wouldn’t want *me* at the Shrine.”

“In olden days, people in our positions would have prayed together to Skietra for deliverance,” Dar’yul mused. “But only the Priests believe in that any longer. The Shrine is nearly always deserted, except for the day they gather to honor her once a year.”

I myself had visited the Shrine once, out of idle curiosity. It had been deserted that day, even by the Priests, and hadn’t impressed me in any case. It had been built centuries ago, soon after the Galen created the Velorians – and before their creators had deserted them, before the split with the Naturalists and all that had followed it, leading to the dilemma they all faced today... No, the Shrine to Skietra was a relic of the past. Today, Velor had to find a way to deal with the future.



Yet little did I know, as Dar'yul getting all the evidence together to return to the homeworld on my behalf and on behalf of my mission, that the Shrine still held symbolic importance, even to the Galen...

And so it came to pass that I missed His Arrival, the greatest event in the history of Velor... which turned out to be, more like the second greatest, next to Her Advent. I missed that too, although I would soon become part of what She wrought.

Chapter Eight

I had been dividing my time on Erin'lah between Opara's headquarters and the *Boundless Opportunity*, while waiting for word from Dar'yul, who had been supplied with copies of the GAR control chips but had put off returning home to study them.

He was hoping they could be used to produce a working model of the weapon to demonstrate to those who had the power to make the decisions I knew had to be made. The data chips of the tests Kevin had carried out should be enough to convince them, but an actual GAR would have more dramatic impact. *Seeing*, for the High Council and the Senate, would be believing...

For all of that, they would have the Scalantrans to thank, as I already had. But in the meantime, there was nothing to do, or see, in and around the port, and nothing to talk about except whether the *Boundless Opportunity* would be pressured to accept a new “cargo” of Companions before we heard from Dar’yul – and, if so, whether Opara and Farishan would stall in order the pressure the High Council to listen to us about the GAR threat.

Erin’lah had nothing of the appeal of Tazzi or the other worlds I had visited since. It was drab, even desolate, just as I remembered from my training days. Yet I missed the company of my own kind, few of whom lived at the port – and those only to do business with the Scalantrans. So I sought out Kal-Entor. He was on duty, I knew, and couldn’t take time off to come see me at the Factor General’s office.

I could call him at the Academy, but I couldn’t meet him at the barracks, shared by instructors, candidates and lottery boys, or at the classrooms. The only alternative was a sex shack, on a day when trainees were otherwise occupied and nobody would notice us. And for old time’s sake, that was just the thing.

“Your reputation precedes you,” he remarked after we greeted each other.

“Let’s not talk about that,” I said, as I disrobed. “That’s not why I’m here.”

“Nor why I’m here,” he agreed, baring himself.

I hungered for a man, a *Velorian* man, and he was up for it, *really* up for it, even after more than 20 years – aging for Velorians here on Erin’lah was slower here than on Velor, if not nearly as slow as on human worlds.

Making love with him was heavenly. No need for gold. No need for caution. We had at each other for hours, in every way. We came and came and came, screaming with absolute abandon each time. When we were finally sated, there was no need for regret... only the romantic afterglow, as we reminisced about old times.

“When we met, could you have imagined anything sillier than my parents joining a cult which believed that as a prima I should serve the Galen as a Procreator? I must have been the oldest virgin in their commune when I managed to escape to Vest’athy.”

Vest’athy... what awaited me there now?

“I don’t imagine even the Priests hold out for that these days,” he said, without guessing what I was thinking. “I don’t know why they bother with the Remembrance.”

“The Tal-Estas never attended. They thought the Priests were backsliders. What must they have thought of *me* when I left them... I reported them to the authorities, but I don't know what came of that – I didn't even *want* to know. I just wanted to put as much distance between me and them as I could – and that meant volunteering to become a Companion.”

“Good for you!”

“I've never regretted it – not since my first fuck, even if that was supposed to be part of my training to hold back with the lottery boys. To feel a man inside me for the first time, to feel him shoot inside me, to feel myself come as I made him come...”

“I wish it had been me!”

“Of course, I had a lot to learn. And you were the best teacher.”

“Happy to have obliged!”

“And you gave me so much to teach others. I loved the lottery boys, coming from worlds far across the Galaxy, just for the chance of making it with a Velorian, knowing the risks... Oh, the adoration on their faces when they met me in the sex shacks, and their surprise that I was as eager as they were – that I wanted them as much as they wanted me. Even when they were *too* eager, when they came from just *looking* at me, I wouldn't let them down – I'd lick their cocks, taste their cum, and they'd be up for me again in no time. I taught them everything there was to know about pleasuring a woman... the women back home they partnered with were the luckiest women alive.”

“And how was your luck – out there on Tazzi?”

“Better than I expected. Salomon Gazrall, who held my indenture, was an older man, but he allowed me... liberties. I even formed... attachments.”

“With Terrans?”

I just nodded, hesitating to reveal anything more. And yet I couldn't forget Mal-kar... and that made me think about Jes'kor, and what connection there could possibly be between them.

Kal-Entor must have seen the look on my face just then; I thought he must have sensed what it was about. Only...

“I could never have had your kind of luck,” he remarked. “A Velorian man and a Terran woman? Fatal to her, even under gold.”

I frowned at him. It wasn't funny. He must have realized that. I feared that our conversation was at an end – at least on the matter realized we had to talk about, the matter that might be crucial to my mission.

A moment later, however, I had my chance as Dar'yul changed the subject.

“Did you also see combat out there?” he asked, “Your latest exercise here was hardly your finest hour.”

“My anger overcame my training, for which I had little use on Tazzi. There were never any serious threats to Gazrall. He himself was the threat to his own people, but my hands were tied, until it became clear that he had allied himself with the Empire – and brought in an Aurean enforcer.”

Had my lover heard about Mal'kar? I couldn't be sure, and dared not be direct with him about it. Yet I had to allude to the matter, now that I had realized that there was a mystery about what Jes'kor had said that set me off – and I sensed an opportunity. I didn't want to mention Mal'kar by name, and yet...

“That enforcer from the Empire. He engaged in terrorism against opponents of Gazrall's regime, and even nuked an entire town to that end. And when I met Jes'kor, he praised the very same Aurean as a man of peace – you can imagine how I felt, why I took out my rage on him. Yet I was so consumed by rage that it didn't occur to me how Jes'kor could have known about that particular Aurean – whether there might be some hidden agenda that—”

“Stop right there! Not my department. You'd better bring this up with that High Councillor they sent to investigate you.”

So I did.

When I met Dar'yul again, I told him how I had been set off by what Jes'kor said about Mal'kar, without wondering at the time how he could have ever *heard* about hm.

“Could Koro'lot be behind it?” I asked, with great trepidation.

“Not a chance. Whatever else you can say about him, he would never betray us by spreading Aurean propaganda. It had to have come through Pimponeous.”

“Pimponeous?”

“An officious Aurean official captured by the Tanzrobians and brought here by the *Far Wanderer* along with his captors. The same ship that had been taken previously by the Aureans at Nova Iberia, but freed by Ju’lette – who first learned about the GAR from the Tanzrobians and came to warn us... you know from the *Galactic Roamer* how that played out. Anyway, Pimponeous has been held by port security ever since, because nobody could figure out what else to do with him.”

“What could he have had to do with—”

“That’s something we need to find out. But how?”

“Tell him you’ll call him as a witness for my hearing before the High Council.”

“But the *gravity*; he’s only a *Betan*.”

“*Exactly!* He’ll be *begging* to talk here instead, on the record.”

“But first I have to get Jes’kor on the record as to what he told you about Mal’kar, and whether he indeed heard it from Pimponeous. He won’t be eager to help your case, to say the least.”

“Since Koro’lat assigned you to investigate *me*, you could simply tell him that his nephew claims to have information about an Aurean I’ve dealt with, and that he should ask Jes’kor for a deposition.”

“Aren’t you the devious one!”

“Not half as devious as the Aureans – what they’ve been doing on Tazzi may be part of some greater plan of infiltration and disinformation.”

I told him about the ruling Garzarolli clan of Himmelsreich, the significance of the GAR’s name, and my belief that the family might have been favored by the Empire and then rescued from the Revolution – with Salomon Gazrall having been a pawn from the start.

“I can’t prove it, but if Pimponeous knows about Mal’kar’s part, he might be in on the rest of it as well.”

“I see...”

“Yet it’s essential that nobody here have any suspicion as to your actual role with me, just on the off chance that it might get back to them prematurely.”

“A tall order. But the first order of business is still for me to brief Koro’lat about the GAR, with the evidence in hand, and discuss how to deal with it. Once that’s settled,

he should be ready to believe the rest from your own testimony, and the High Council will surely want the Senate to take it all up.”

“Do you suppose that the Senate might authorize an operation against Gazrall for turning Tazzi into an Aurean base?”

“We’d need the Scalantrans to transport our forces. But perhaps we should think of creating a Navy.”

“History in the making... I’ve never imagined I might play a part in *that*.”

I could never have imagined the part I actually *would* play.

* * *

Dar’yul left for Velor a few days before the Remembrance.

Jes’kor and his retainers followed on the Day itself.

That surprised me, although his family connection gave him the privilege. Along with one of the candidates he had taken unto himself, without her consent. Well, like the others, she’d have to get used to that when she faced indenture....

What didn’t surprise me was that he had left orders for everyone else to stick to the business of combat training.

With nobody to supervise them – at least, nobody callous enough to rat them out – the candidates and the lottery boys and even the instructors got down to the business of fucking. Couples had to wait in line at the sex shacks.

Kal-Entor had a better idea: the Academy superintendent’s home/office, the only private facility here...

Some of the others actually cheered when we made our intentions known. “Break his fucking bed!” one even shouted.

That bed was designed and built for Velorians. But we managed to break it just the same, in the heat of our passion.

What broke while we were at it was the news from the Remembrance...

TO BE CONTINUED