

Homecoming

Part II

By Velvet Belle Tree

With Brantley Thompson Elkins

1. Leavetaking

Everyone aboard the *Far Wanderer* was happy to finally leave Meetpoint 17 and continue their journey towards Andros. Even Ju'lette noticed a change in attitude among the crew. The sadness was replaced by a sense of hope stemming from the enthusiasm of the new crew members.

The new attitude infected Ju'lette and she vowed to participate more in the life of the ship. The new crew members knew, of course, of her rescue of the *Far Wanderer* and had heard of her rescue of the children just before departure. They were anxious to meet her and learn about Velor and the Companions. The idea of being a concubine seemed odd to them and they thought that her other abilities should be sufficient for gainful employment.

Although her talents might have been put to good use on the way to Meetpoint 17, the Scalantrans were too overburdened by work and too frazzled to give any thought to

the matter. So she had spent most of her time with advanced study of Scalantran language and literature, and had exercised as best she could in the cramped space of her room -- running in the halls fast enough to do her supple muscles any good would have endangered the ship itself, not to mention the Scalantrons.

With crew strength close to normal, Aleeza now had more time to spend with Ju'lette and said she would give some thought to the matter. A few days later, she came to Ju'lette's room and said: "I've talked it over with some of the crew members. Some of them would like you to try to adapt your knowledge of martial arts to Scalantran physiognomy and give classes. I've told others about your knowledge of different cultures and it's been suggested that you could teach some of that to our older children and give them an appreciation of other cultures."

Ju'lette liked both suggestions. She had observed how the Scalantrons used their double thumbed hands with the ship's controls and sundry tools, and thought she could adapt grips she had learned to suit them. And it would be good to finally put the cultural knowledge she had learned at the Companions' Academy to good use.

It would also help keep her mind off other things, for her mind and heart were now divided. Of *course*, she had told Mapolom, she understood the importance of reporting to the Factor General on Andros. Of *course* she sympathized with Jonjerem, who now had more personal business there. Yet she had business of her own on Velor, business that her mind couldn't justify delaying. Only her heart called out to... Tassos.

It might be a fool's errand, she knew, seeking him out after all this time. So she tried to justify the call at Andros — which was, after all, a stopover on the journey to her ultimate destination — by the chance of meeting and comparing notes with Kalla. Kalla, she knew, had led the defense of her adopted system against an Arion invasion. It had been the technological revolution she had fostered and not merely her own powers that

had won the day there. Kalla surely had useful intelligence to share with Velor, if she had not shared it already.

Ju'lette and Aleeza also had more time for personal conversations. Aleeza told her about her growing relationship with Densan. "I'm spending more and more time with him. At first, we thought it was just a continuation of the great pleasure we found together at the Welcoming Ceremony. But then we found that we just enjoyed being together.

"He is being trained by Jonjerem to be the new ship's historian. I tell him personal things about crew members that I knew to try to bring them to life for him. And doing this helps me think of them in life instead of their horrible deaths. And he tells me about life aboard the *Galactic Cruiser*."

"What about Mican," Ju'lette asked.

"We are still close but he's no longer my one-mate. Froyda, our new ship's mental health counselor, thinks its better for the survivors to spend less time together and mix with the newcomers. She says its time to stop dwelling in the past and start new lives. I think she's right. Densan has brought joy back into my life."

2. Coming of Age

Aleeza had been paying Ju'lette one of her many visits, when Ju'lette said: "Aleeza, a long time ago, you said you'd tell me about your youth-group. Could you do that now?"

"I have wonderful memories of my days in youth-group", Aleeza responded. "But please don't imagine it was all fun. This was the time that we started our serious education. At the beginning, we all studied the same things; things that any adult Scalantran would need to know. But later, when we decided on our specialties, we had

smaller classes. And sometimes, those of us who needed highly specialized training would have to leave the group and join a more specialized youth-group.

“But at night, after our studies were done and on days when we had no lessons — that’s when we could enjoy ourselves. The group had several sleeping rooms and we didn’t have an assigned room. The teachers, of course, had their own quarters in another building.

“It was really a time of experimenting — learning about each other. So we were encouraged not to form attachments but to give and accept invitations to as many as possible. Remember, most of us would wind up in different mate-groups or different ships. Of course, after a while I found there were some boys I liked much more than others and some I really didn’t like at all. “

“What did you do when someone you didn’t like invited you to spend the night with him?” Ju’lette asked.

“Well, that was another skill we were supposed to learn, since we’d be needing that in our adult mate-groups. If I started to enter the sleep area and saw a boy I didn’t like, I looked around for one I did like and quickly walked over to him and invited him. The important thing was not making eye contact with someone I wanted to avoid.

“Did any boy ever behave really badly — maybe get rough?”

Unbidden, the incident that Aleeza had tried to forget sprang to her mind. She remembered the beautiful late spring day, not long after she had joined the youth-group. She remembered trees fully leafed out and abundant flowers in bloom. And she remembered how happy they had all been that there were no lessons that day and that they could do as they pleased.

And she remembered how flattered she’d been when Rafan asked her to go for a walk with him. He was older, more mature, beginning to look like an adult. She even remembered hoping that he’d like her enough to invite her to spend the night with him.

She remembered how he took her hand and led her into the nearby woods. As they walked he asked her about herself and the ship she'd lived on. She could even remember how wonderful the sun felt on her as it filtered through the branches of the trees.

But then, the good memories stopped. She remembered how surprised she was when he suddenly stopped and grabbed her arms and pushed her to the ground. She remembered struggling with him, crying out, knowing that there was no one close enough to hear her. Then she remembered how he had forced himself inside her, brutally pounding away. She'd cried and pushed at him but it did her no good.

She hadn't been able to understand why he was doing that, why he didn't want sex in the normal way. And it had hurt so badly! She remembered that it had never before occurred to her that sex could hurt.

She remembered that when he finally finished he threatened her, telling her she wouldn't like the consequences if she told anyone, that no one would believe her anyway. So she just ran back to the house and kept to herself for a few days, refusing all invitations. Finally, one of the older girls asked her why she was behaving so strangely and she broke down and told her what had happened.

It was a long time before she could really enjoy sex again.

She could not tell this to Ju'lette, so she merely said: "If a girl is hurt she will tell all the other girls who will avoid that boy and have nothing to do with him. Soon, the other boys will find out and they too will have nothing to do with him. Then, after a while, he'll disappear, presumably having requested transfer to another youth-group. If he continues to behave the same way the process will repeat itself. When it comes time to be inducted into a mate-group, his history will be known and no mate-group will want him. He'll become an outcast and never be part of Scalantran society. We don't want them

around to cause us trouble, so the next available ship will transport them to a non-Scalantran planet — and then they're on their own.”

Now Ju'lette wanted to lighten the mood. “There must have been fun times. Tell me about them.”

“Oh yes,” Aleeza replied. “We did have fun. Sometimes we would go to another youth-group or one would come to us. The official reason was to hear some special lecture or for an athletic competition. But the fun and games started afterwards. If it was an athletic competition, the winning team would choose their partner for the night from the losing team. Sometimes we selected partners – always from the other group – randomly. We always laughed a lot – it was always in a group so you didn't have to worry about being with a stranger. Then there was the game we played when we had been in our group for a while and knew everyone well. Sometimes the girls would be blindfolded and the boys would choose the girls, another time the roles would be reversed. No one was allowed to talk. Then you had to guess who you had been with. “

3. Arriving Hopefully

The *Far Wanderer* had just completed passage through the last wormhole to the Androssian system. Marcon, the ship's Communications Officer, was anxious to get the first message through to Robinta, the Factor General on Andros.

It would be a short message, just to alert her to the situation and apprise the Scalantran community of their impending arrival. He had also, reluctantly, agreed to relay a message from Ju'lette, grumbling about the use of the ship's communications system for personal messages.

“Far Wanderer entering Androssian system. Ship attacked by Arions attempting conquest of Nova Iberia. Great crew loss. Survivors and Nova Iberia saved by two Velorians. Crew replenished at Meetpoint. Will report fully in person. Conveying desire of Ju’lette Raul’lan to inform Tassos Vakros of her presence on this ship.”

Robinta was greatly disturbed by the news of the attack. This was the first Arion attack she had heard about since the assault on Andros had been repelled by Kalla and the Patriarch’s armada. There was much to do before the landing besides the usual preparations for a ship’s arrival.

Although the arrival of a Scalantran ship was not usually of any interest to the Androssian government, she felt that Patriarch Constantine should be given the news, since he would want to know the details of the attack on Nova Iberia. She also made arrangements to inform Kalla, since she knew that Kalla and Ju’lette would want to confer.

Robinta didn’t know why Ju’lette was sending a message to Tassos, but she would have no problem relaying it. Vakros was a high official on the Andros Trade Board here in Feodoropolis and as such had an ongoing business relationship with the Scalantrans.

Receiving the message from Ju’lette was a wonderful surprise for Tassos. He had meant it when he said he would never forget her. And now, after all this time, it seemed that she had not forgotten him.

The voyage to and from Velor and his short time with Ju’lette had had a profound effect on his life. Although many things seemed to interest him, he had not found a sense of direction in his life prior to the trip. His exposure to the Scalantrans and his conversations with Ju’lette had focused his interests on other cultures and on art.

He had realized that he wanted to sell Andros' mosaics to other planets. To do this, he had to study their cultures and their history so that the Androssian artisans would know what they would like portrayed in mosaics. Recently, he had obtained contracts from two planets to produce large mosaics for government buildings depicting seminal events in their histories.

The other effect of having been a Lottery Boy was that, contrary to custom, he was still a bachelor. The mores of Andros had loosened up to the point that it was easy for him to have a full sex life. He had enjoyed the favors of many women since Ju'lette. But none of the relationships became really serious. There was no one with whom he would want to spend his life. He could find no woman who made his heart sing the way Ju'lette had. Luckily for him, he had two brothers and a sister, all of whom were married and had children, so there was very little pressure from his parents, and he could indulge in the bachelor's life.

He knew nothing of the life she had led since they had known each other but was anxious to find out, and he wanted to tell her about the things that he had done and thought. To facilitate this, he spent the time until her arrival refreshing his knowledge of the Velorian language.

4. Factoring the Dangers

"Your experience has shown the wisdom of our policy," Robinta said. "You are to be commended for having followed it to the letter."

Travel Captain Marpolom nodded in acknowledgement, but added: "Credit must be given our retiring historian Jonjerem. He it was who taught the younglings and instilled the discipline. Were it not for him, none of the new generation might have survived."

“Jonjerem has a long memory. Longer than his own life.”

“As must we all, it now appears. Our enemies, of a certainty, dwell on memories of the past war. They rebuked us for the First Strike when they held control of the *Far Wanderer*, and taunted us with threats of vengeance.”

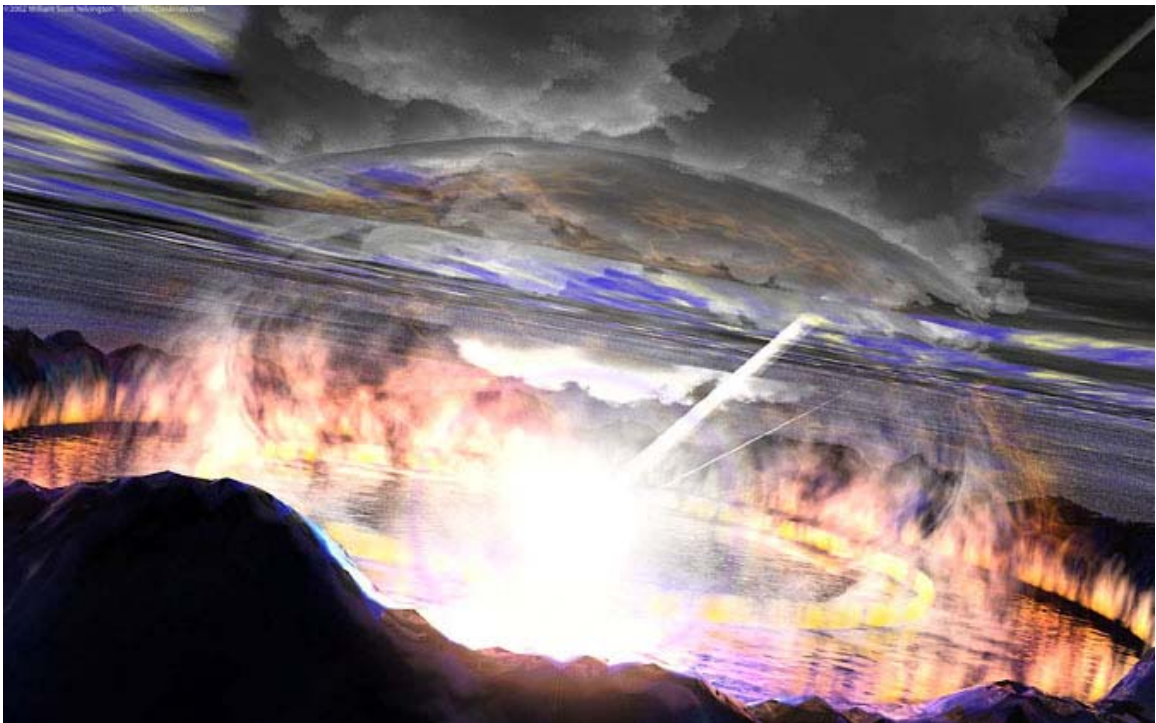
“Yet they have foregone direct attacks for generations.”

“Perhaps they were only biding their time. We outfought them last time, albeit at such a cost that it became too great to bear. Have you word from other ships, from other meetpoints, of advances in their weaponry that might tempt them to renew the war?”

"Only minor improvements, such as you and the Velorian have reported. Still, the force that came to Nova Iberia was a small one. It might have been a mere probe, a feint."

"Not to us."

"Even so. But were you the primary target? I think not. Some greater scheme appears to have been at work here."



Ju'lette was not privy to the discussion in the Factor General's office, but she had a pretty good idea what they were talking about. She had heard often enough about the First Strike, the Scalantran attack on the Arions' homeworld, when Aria was their only world, before they had even made it off planet.

As the Scalantrans told it, they had struck only after the Arions had attacked a trade mission – similar to the earlier mission to Velor – killing or enslaving the crew and traders. She had no reason to doubt it, despite later claims by the Empire that the Scalantrans had been pirates.

The Scalantrans had always believed in clarity of word and action. Hundreds of years earlier, Jonjerem had told her, one of their ships had similarly punished a world of the Diaboi, who had used the power of their minds to cheat them. Once beyond range, having regained control of their minds, the traders had determined to teach the Diaboli a lesson. They hadn't had weapons then, so they'd thrown rocks at the planet – literally, with a mass driver. The Diaboli had rarely bothered them again, Marpolom had told her.

That might have been because the Diaboli were having troubles with the Elders, or with the Galen, Ju'lette suspected, based on the kind of history she'd learned on Velor – but she wasn't going to press that point with people who were now her friends. The fact remained that the First Strike had proven to be a disaster for the Galaxy as well as for the Scalantrans. It had led the Arions to conquer space. It had led them to found an Empire – an Empire dedicated to uniting by force all the scattered worlds of mankind, and driving away or exterminating all who were not made in the image of mankind.

Whatever Robinta and the others decided, whatever course they took, her own purpose was clear: she would continue to Velor. She would bear witness.

5. Reunion

Ju'lette was having a hard time controlling herself on the drive to Tassos' country home. She was afraid the seat would get wet. More importantly, she was afraid that her pheromones would distract Tassos from concentrating on his driving.

He had explained that the only chance he got to drive his new car was when he went to his country home. In the city, he used the excellent public transportation and when he went to meetings outside the city, he always had an official driver. He enjoyed maneuvering his car through the country roads, but did need to concentrate.

So she sat as far away from him as possible and looked straight ahead or out the side window, pretending to be fascinated by the countryside. But inside, she had no interest in the view, and only wanted to get to the house as quickly as possible. She knew it would have been much faster to fly there with him. But she felt that as a visitor to Andros she should try to be as unobtrusive as possible and she didn't think Tassos would be happy with such an arrangement — that it would somehow diminish him.

And she needed Tassos. She needed him in a way that she had never needed a man before. It wasn't simply because she had been without a man for so long. It was that she needed *him*. She needed his gentle but confident masculinity. She needed his lovemaking to heal her from the damage done by Don Alfonso. Although he could not physically harm her, he had been able to ravage her soul.

Tassos had exaggerated his driving inexperience because he knew that he would need Ju'lette's cooperation so that he could concentrate on his driving. She, and his feelings for her were that distracting.

Although over the years he had dreamed of their time together and fantasized about seeing her again, now that it was reality, he was slightly nervous. Could it really have

been as wonderful as he remembered? After all, they had only been together a few days, and most of that time had been spent exploring the joys of the flesh.

And even if the sex was great, by the time they had to return to Feodoropolis after the weekend, would he find that that was all there was? That her beauty was only skin deep? That the warm, loving, giving, intelligent, benevolent woman he thought she was, was only a figment of his imagination?

So he used his need to concentrate on driving to banish these thoughts from his mind.

He finally turned off into a narrow dirt road and it wasn't long before they arrived at his house. It was not very large and was constructed of lovely native stone. The immediate grounds were obviously well taken care of. In addition to the visible grounds, he owned olive groves and vineyards which had been planted with stock brought from Greece by the original abductees.

When they entered the house, they stood there, gazing at each other.

Finally, Tassos spoke: "It's been a long time, Ju'lette. You've changed — matured. But as lovely as ever. Though I think, perhaps, your experiences are haunting you."

"Later Tassos, later," she replied. "We'll talk later and tell each other all that has happened. But this isn't the time to talk."

"You're right Ju'lette." Tassos took her in his arms and kissed her hungrily.

Without conscious thought, they found themselves naked, in front of the dormant fireplace. She, lying on the pillows that were strewn there and he kneeling at her side; his lips working their way down her body, stopping to suck each lovely nipple. He continued down her belly, his tongue darting into her navel.

When he got near her pubic mound she whispered huskily, her voice breaking: "I can't stand it anymore. TAKE ME TASSOS!"

He knelt between her outstretched legs, his hot throbbing manhood eager to plunge into her yearning cunt. As he entered her she started to moan softly. Her body answered each of his thrusts and her moaning grew louder and wilder with each mutual stroke, reaching a crescendo when her final scream, which hardly sounded human, blended with his triumphant shout of her name and his lapsing into Romaic, calling on the god in whom he no longer believed.

They lay together, quietly, their arms around each other. *If this is merely physical, he thought to himself, why do I feel so wonderful, so joyous, so peaceful? I've never felt this way with any other woman.*

And then they started caressing each other again. She turned with her back to him and he slowly caressed her back and then her ass. His hand slid through her legs and caressed her lips, stroking slowly, her ass pressing against him and feeling his hardness. She quickly turned and pushed him on his back. Her mouth went hungrily to envelop his cock. Then she lifted her head, smiled, and impaled herself on him. She rocked and rocked, oblivious to the world, aware only of his cock moving inside her, until they both came with joyful screams.

They had lain by the fireplace awhile before Tassos led her into the bedroom. Now they were reclining on sheets of the finest silk. That and the pillows strategically placed in front of the fireplace told Ju'lette that Tassos had not been without female companionship. She was glad — that was how it should be.

Tassos kissed her gently and then said: "Tell me Ju'lette. Now tell me what has happened to you." She sat up and waited a moment, gathering her thoughts and then spoke in measured tones.

“When I graduated from the Companions’ Academy, I was full of hope. I wanted to be like Kalla — indentured to a man who was a leader. A man who loved his people, and worked for their betterment. And I wanted to help him. Instead, I was indentured to a cruel man who only wanted his own betterment. He didn’t care for his people. He didn’t care for me. All he wanted me for was to show me off as a trophy.

“And all he wanted sexually was to try to hurt me, then take me quickly and briefly with no emotion. He inflicted pleasure on me. I hated him for it — and I hated myself for responding to him.”

Tassos wanted to tell her how it hurt him that a man was cruel to her. That she didn’t deserve such treatment — no woman did. He wanted to tell her not to blame herself for her nature. That she couldn’t help responding. But she didn’t pause long enough for him to say anything.

“Don Alfonso — who styled himself *del Rey* — only wanted power for himself. And when the Arions came, he couldn’t wait to sell out his people for that power.

“Then Liz’bet Kim’Vallara, who was indentured to a merchant named Gabriel Molina, came to me. Gabriel and Don Alfonso’s brother-in-law Father Manuel, had already been sacrificed for the people of Nova Iberia. Together, we destroyed the Arions and their ships.”

“What weapons did you use against them?” he asked.

“No weapons — just our own bodies.”

Andros had had plenty of weapons when its time had come, Tassos thought. Thanks to Kalla. Still, it had come down to her body in the decisive moments of the Battle of the Triple Moons. But Ju’lette had had nothing but her body -- this body, the body he had just shared and ached now to share again.

The thought that this incredible woman had faced the most fearsome weapons of the Arions, that she had placed her invulnerable body between them and an innocent planet,

drove him wild with desire. And she wanted him! This goddess *wanted* him. He could barely stand it, but he knew that first, he must let her know what he thought of her. That it was *her*, the heroine, that he wanted.

He took her hand. "Come with me to the garden. There's an entrance from the house. The walls are high and it's very private, so we don't have to dress."



Ju'lette looked around the garden, slowly turning in a circle. "It's beautiful Tassos."

Tassos walked over to an olive tree, found a supple young branch and broke it off. He formed it into a circle and tied it with some vine.

Turning to her he said: "You defended a world with your naked body. You were their protector and should be rewarded. In ancient times, the olive tree was sacred to my people. We considered it the most valued gift of the gods. It was the symbol of peace,

sustenance and life. We rewarded heroes by crowning them with an olive wreath. Please bend down so I may thus honor you. “

She gratefully bent down and humbly accepted his tribute.

“And here is my personal tribute to you,” Tassos said as he led her to a leafy bough beneath the tree.

He held her on his lap, cradling her body as the precious thing it was. He kissed her tenderly, starting at her forehead and working down. He stopped for several moments at her lips, his tongue outlining them and then darting into her mouth. His kisses went from her chin down her neck. And then he kissed each lovely breast, his tongue circling the nipple, his lips sucking them. It seemed to her as if he almost forgot to continue.

By the time he got to her belly she was groaning with pleasure and anticipation. Her legs were already parted and her groans growing louder when he reached her nether lips, kissing and sucking. She wanted to tell him to take her, but felt that it was right to let him be in complete control, going at his own pace and being the giver of pleasure.

Finally, he shifted position and entered her, and she savored the feeling of his cock sliding into her cunt. He stroked slowly and deeply, almost withdrawing each time. She cried out in pleasure, her head thrown back in ecstasy. Then, he seemed as if he could control himself no longer and his thrusts increased in intensity until they came, her scream of joy joining his shout of, “Ju’lette, Ju’lette, my goddess!”

They lay together, wrapped in each other’s arms. She sighed deeply and whispered to him “Tassos, my darling, you have brought me peace.”

Ju’lette awoke the next morning to an empty bed and a wonderful aroma coming from the kitchen. She followed her nose and found Tassos, in a robe, preparing breakfast.

“Smells great,” Ju’lette said. “But I don’t think I’m dressed for the occasion.”

“There’s a woman’s robe in the closet. I hope you don’t mind that it’s been worn by other women.”

“Not at all. I just hope they made you happy.”

“Yes — but nowhere near as happy as you’ve made me.”

Ju’lette returned wearing a rose colored robe that came to mid-calf. She assumed that it was supposed to be ankle length, since she was much taller than an Androssian woman.

Tassos had finished cooking and the food was on the table, ready to be eaten. He gestured her to a seat and they began their meal. After a few bites, Ju’lette said: “This is delicious. I’m surprised that you’re such a good cook.”

“Well, I prefer living alone, which makes cooking a necessary skill.”

“I never had a chance to learn to cook.”

“It’s not very hard. I don’t do anything fancy. But tonight, I’ll try to make something special for our dinner.”

“How did you learn?”

“Oh, by watching my mother and by watching”

“The women you brought here?”

“Right. I think some of them showed off their culinary skills as an inducement to marriage.”

“Were you ever tempted?”

“Once or twice. But then I thought of you — and the temptation vanished.”

Ju’lette didn’t know what to say, so she just put her hand over his and smiled at him.

When they had finished eating and cleaning up, Tassos said: “Now let’s get dressed. I want to show you around the estate and the town.”

The first thing he showed her was the olive grove. “Harvest is next month. A lot of the townspeople will come to work here then. We make a wonderful olive oil in town — I’ll use it for making dinner tonight.”

Then he took her to the vineyards. “We’re very proud of our wine. I have a specially good vintage that we’ll have tonight.”

They walked through the village and he introduced Ju’lette to everyone he met. She could tell that he was well liked, although it was difficult for her to understand them, with their thick country accents.

They ate their lunch in a small *taberna*. The food was simple but satisfying, as was the wine. Then they stopped at the butcher and a greengrocer to buy food for their dinner and took a leisurely walk home.

They spent the afternoon driving up towards the mountains. More than once, they had to stop to let a shepherd take his flock across the road. When Ju’lette exclaimed about the cute sheep, Tassos said: “I’m afraid you’re going to have one of their relatives for dinner.”

When they got back, Tassos told Ju’lette to relax while he made dinner. He set the table with his finest china and goblets, and called her in when all was ready.

He started the meal by pouring the wine and proposing a toast: “To our wonderful reunion.”

She tasted the wine. “I’m no expert on wine, but this is good — especially compared to what we had at lunch!”

The meal consisted of the local lamb and vegetables cooked with the local olive oil.

“This is all wonderful, Tassos. You can be proud of what you produce here.”

She saw him beaming at her. “Thank you. I’m glad that you like it.”

When they were finished, Tassos picked up his dish and got up. “Sit still,” Ju’lette said. “Now that I know where everything is, I can clean up. It’s only fair after you made this delicious meal.”

The next morning, while they were eating breakfast, Ju’lette could feel Tassos’ eyes gazing at her, staring at her face and her body. Was he remembering their night of lovemaking? They’d kept at it until Tassos fell asleep, a look of exhaustion on his face.

Ju’lette felt a warm glow, remembering how wonderful it had been. And it had been different from the first night — warmer, slower — each time lasting until a glorious climax. They’d spent more time exploring each other’s bodies with hands and mouth, more time simply caressing each other.

When they were finished eating, Tassos reached out his hand to her and implored: “Once more Ju’lette — once more before we have to leave.”

She smiled at him. Just the look of desire on his face excited her. He turned his chair around and opened his robe. She saw that he was fully ready for her. She went over to him, kissed him, and then straddled him and impaled herself. With arms around each other, she rode him hard until they both exploded joyously.

They would have liked to remain longer, but duty called.

Tassos was needed at the Trade Board. He took his job very seriously.

Ju’lette, for her part, had received an invitation from Kalla, a legend here on Andros and even on Velor, for a private audience.

And a summons from Patriarch Constantine himself to speak before the Megalos Synodos, the world legislature.

She would have wished to meet with her Velorian kinswoman in any case. As for the rest, the Factor General herself had advised that it would be considered impolitic at best to try to avoid or delay such an appearance.

6. Civics Lesson

The drive back to the Feodoropolis was very different from the drive out. They were now completely at ease in each other's company. They no longer were plagued by doubts. They knew that their feelings for each other were real.

Now, Ju'lette had to prepare herself mentally to the tasks ahead. She looked forward to meeting with Kalla but was nervous about testifying at the hearing to be held by the Megalos Synodos. She had briefly studied the Androssian political system on the *Far Wanderer*, but felt it would be helpful to understand it better.

"Tassos", she said. "Could you help me understand Androssian politics?"

"OK, I'll try to give you a brief overview of our history", he responded. "When the Surrogates brought us here, they set up many scattered colonies instead of one big one. They were similar to the ancient city states. There was a great deal of competition, and even warfare between these states. Some of the stronger ones conquered others and some merged peacefully.

"It was Feodor, the first Patriarch, who consolidated all the states. He did this by conquest and persuasion – and a marriage of convenience. He had a brilliant military mind. But the smartest thing he did was to gain his troops undying loyalty by giving them land when they enlisted.

"He gave his family name, Andros, to the planet, after rewarding himself with Kalla as his Companion. He had no idea how important this would be. She was more than just his

concubine, giving him prestige by her beauty and powers. Her intelligence is almost as great as her beauty. She protected him from assassins and also helped cement relations with his allies.

“And then she became the concubine of his heirs. She stayed with the family even after her period of indenture was up. She protected his heirs even when they were not good men, believing that keeping the dynasty going was essential to the stability of Andros.”

“Tell me about the Megalos Synodos,” Ju’lette said.

“At first, the Synodos was only an advisory council to the Patriarch. The Patriarchs had absolute power and didn’t have to listen to his advisors. But gradually, they gave up power to the expanded Megalos Synodos which became an elected legislative body — except for the hereditary great landholders. Still, the Patriarch does retain quite a bit of power.”

“How are they elected?”

“Everyone above the age of 30 who owns property can vote...”

“*Everyone?*” Ju’lette interrupted.

“You mean, *women?*” Tassos grinned. “Of course. As long as they’re owners or co-owners of estates and enterprises. Which is usually the case if they’re married and more and more the case if they aren’t.”

“Women don’t have any say in *anything* back on Velor.”

“Well, it’s different here, thanks to our resident Velorian. Kalla had been advocating equal rights for generations, but after the Battle of the Triple Moons the Patriarch and the Megalos Synodus had to give in. After all, she *had* saved the planet, and the women of Andros played a part – they didn’t serve in the military, but they’d been involved on the technical side ever since she initiated our space program; they helped design warships

and even weapons systems. My great aunt was one of them, and she took part in the demonstration after the Arions fled in defeat.”

“Demonstration?”

“It was Kalla’s idea again. She knew the time was right. She always seems to know when the time is right. So she put the word out, and half a million women turned out in front of the World Palace carrying banners saying, ‘We served too.’”

“What did the men say?”

“Some of them grumbled. But some of them cheered. And most of them went along. Since then, a lot of women have been elected members of the Megalos Synodos, which represents the landed militia of the *thema* in the country and the propertied classes in the towns and cities. Besides land, property can be a house or even a certain income. The electorate is quite varied, and there’s some rivalry between city dwellers and farmers.”

“Can you give me any advice about how I should testify?”

“Be very polite, very formal. The members of the Megalos Synodos like to put on a show of great dignity and are very conservative. They even wear an outmoded form of dress to distinguish themselves from ordinary people. They carry on their deliberations in classic Romaic rather than the vernacular. So you too must act very dignified and dress very conservatively. There are still a few days before you are to testify and I think that I can have an appropriate outfit made for you. Wear your hair pulled back — maybe in a bun. Act very seriously. You can flirt with the men and use your charm in private but *never* in public.”

7. Reasons of State

The ceremonial guards left her at the door to Kalla's private chambers.

"She awaits you," one of them said. "We will remain here."

Ju'lette entered the foyer and closed the door behind herself.

The far door opened, and Kalla silently beckoned her. She followed her to the Companion's private reception room.

It was at once simple and luxurious. There was a sofa and two matching armchairs. They were upholstered with the finest brocade and were matched by the heavy drapes on the window which let sunlight flood the room. The sofa and chairs were grouped around an low oval table, made from a highly polished wood unfamiliar to Ju'lette. A silver tray with matching carafe and two exquisite crystal goblets were on the table.

On the walls were hung tapestries of Byzantine design such as she had seen before, but depicting starscapes and Androssian trading ships.

Kalla motioned Ju'lette to a chair and then poured some wine from the carafe into the goblets. She offered one to Ju'lette and then took one herself before sitting on the other chair.

"You are a brave and resourceful woman," Kalla said. "And a very lucky one."

"My luck has changed of late."



Kalla was taken aback for a moment, then nodded in understanding, then laughed.

"Oh, I wasn't talking about *him*," the older Companion said. "Although the look on your face speaks volumes. No, I meant back at Nova Iberia. You may have faced advances in Arion military technology, but none that threatened *you* — and such were to be expected, in light of several defeats they had suffered here and in other systems where we serve."

Other systems? Ju'lette thought. She would have to learn more of this. But she had a more immediate question now.

"The Scalantrans, as you know, fear that the attack may have been aimed at them rather than at Nova Iberia. Their Factor General here has received no word of previous actions of the same kind. This could represent a serious escalation."

"Or simply a local initiative by an ambitious commander. It was a small force, compared to those typical of the Empire against human systems. In that too, you were lucky. But you were luckiest of all that the attack took place at the time it did, and that the new Exception could be invoked."

"Lucky?"

"Think for a moment. Had your Don Alfonso achieved power by ordinary means, you would have been obligated to share the bed of a tyrant, to protect him from the just wrath of his own people, to aid and abet him in his crimes, to help lay the foundations for an evil state that would outlive him, outlive your indenture.

"That fate might well have overtaken me here, had not Feodor and his son Jayar been enlightened rulers. It was for their sake, for the sake of what they had established, that I endured what I later had to endure."

Kalla paused to take a sip of her wine.

"It was during the reign of Kyros. I had fulfilled my term of indenture, as you know, and yet I continued my office because I had by then fallen in love with this world. I saw great possibilities for it. I even felt a kinship towards the people. Feodor's mother, you know, was a Varangian, and there were other Varangians — kin to the Scanians who were brought to Velor — among the original abductees, although most of them were Greeks from a realm called the Romaic Empire.

"Kyros was a cruel man. He dissolved the old Synodos and ruled by decree. He seized a number of the Great Estates and awarded them to his supporters, taxed the Lesser Estates into near bankruptcy to finance extravagances like new palaces in every *themo* — and new prisons for those who offended him. You might well ask why I tolerated this — I, who bore him no obligation, who could have killed him as easily as swatting a fly."

Ju'lette didn't know what to say. It was all so overwhelming.

"I had my reasons. Reasons of state. The Patriarchate, you see, is not simply one man; it is an institution, part of a complex web of institutions — the *thema* and the organization of emergency forces, the courts and the Justinian code, the catapanates and synods... It goes on and on. I knew that. I knew that these would outlive Kyros, as I would outlive him. I endured him for the sake of the future, and that future has come to pass, as I hoped it would.

"I did what I could at the time to mitigate the sufferings. There were those who tried to assassinate Kyros. I killed them swiftly; he would have had them tortured. I sent warnings to those in danger of arrest for political crimes; sometimes they were able to escape. I interfered at first with some political executions in the capital; that was a mistake — Kyros ordered executions tenfold elsewhere, and I could not be everywhere at once to stop them."

Kalla put her goblet down, rose and took a few steps, surprised that the memory of what she was about to tell Ju'lette still had the power to distress her.

"I was approached in secret by an emissary of the Catapan of the Northern Reach. Were I but to give the word, he told me, the armies of every *themo* in the region would rise against the Patriarch. But that would have meant civil war and great slaughter; I could see no end to it. So I slew the emissary, and all but one of his retainers. That retainer alone returned to tell the tale. There was no rising. It was a bitter thing I did, but a necessary one.

"One thing I finally accomplished to redeem myself: I saved the family. Kyros feared his younger brothers in his declining years. He imagined that they were conspiring against him to seize the throne. When I learned of his intention to have them slain, I brought them to the regional palace in Nesalonika, with their wives and children and placed them under my personal protection. He sent his Dark Warriors against us; I defeated them easily.

"Kyros then had the audacity to present himself at the gate and demand entrance. I refused him. He drew his sword and assailed me, though he knew he could not harm me. His rage seemed to know no end, yet his weapon did. When the blade broke against my chest, he looked at it curiously, then dropped it and finally retreated. Perhaps the humiliation speeded his end; he died a few months later.

"Now do you understand how lucky you were?"

8. The World Stage

This was her hour. Ju'lette stood at the podium, directly under the Great Dome of the Petrovousa.

There were four wings to the World Palace, topped by lesser domes. Like its model, the Hagia Sophia, the Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople, the structure took the form of a cross. But there the resemblance ended.

At the short end of the cross, where there would have been an altar and the most sacred icons had this been a church, stood the Great Throne of the Patriarch, and the lesser thrones of his families—biological and official. There was a place of honor for Kalla in the first rank, but not immediately beside him: Constantine's wife Zoë took that station. Over them, high on the walls of the wing were the mosaics of Feodor, Jayar, Nestor and Constantine himself. Kyros was conspicuously absent, but Kalla had her place.

Seated in the other three wings were the three classes of the Megalos Synodos. There were the *ktimatiata*, the holders of the great hereditary estates. There were two classes of *apeztalmeno*, or elected delegates, representing respectively the *politofilaka*, or landed militias of the *thema*; and the *astika*, or holders of property inhabiting the larger

towns and cities. Beyond the long end of the cross, beyond the domes, were the administrative offices of the Patriarchate.

At Ju'lette's left, standing slightly back of her, was her translator. She was a young professor of languages at the Great Academy of Feodoropolis, the center of higher learning founded by the first Patriarch, to revive the glory of the Greek Academies and nurtured through the years by Kalla. Ju'lette, of course, would speak in Velorian but she would use the honorifics that Tassos had taught her.

Ju'lette glanced up at the gallery where Tassos was seated. He caught her glance and gave her an encouraging smile. The gallery was small and only people with connections were able to get seats there. But the session was being televised so the general populace could watch. The cameras were discreetly placed and the assembled government functionaries ignored them with great dignity.

Ju'lette gathered her thoughts, took a deep breath, and began to speak. "*Megaleitate,*" she said and bowed her head slightly to the Patriarch. "*Akeraio kurianchiata kai apeztalmeno*", she continued, turning to the lords of the great estates and then to the delegates. "I thank you for giving me the great honor of addressing you.

"Since, I have already submitted a report to your military affairs committee giving a detailed description of the Arions' ship and armament, I will now give you an overview of the events on Nova Iberia and then take your questions.

"The Arions overwhelmed the *Far Wanderer*, the Scalantran ship that traded with Nova Iberia. They killed a large portion of the Scalantrans on the ship, and were able to do so without disabling the ship. They landed the ship without trouble. Their object was to set up a puppet government and thereby take over the planet.

"I was at that time indentured to Don Alfonso del Rey, a wealthy landowner who wished to acquire as much power as possible. He also had a dubious claim to the royal line back on Earth. He offered himself as the puppet ruler desired by the Arions.

“Liz’bet Kim’Vallara is another Velorian Companion who had been indentured to a prominent merchant for about 30 years. She came to me, and together we planned the destruction of the Arions’ ships. She had more knowledge of flying in space and I had the recent knowledge gained at the Companions’ Academy of the Arion ships’ designs.

“Liz’bet was able to penetrate the hull of the first ship, which was in close orbit, disable it, and destroy the life support system, killing all of the Arions. I was seeing to the safety of my charges, and could not join her for that. Then together, we destroyed the Arion ship that was approaching the planet from the wormhole.

“We then returned to the planet to deal with their commander. He attempted to flee aboard the *Far Wanderer*, but the Scalantrans, it transpired, had their own way to deal with him when the chance presented itself. At their own request, I have not included the details in my report. Suffice it to say that this action freed the surviving Scalantrans, which we were happy to find included all of their children.

“The Nova Iberians took care of their traitor themselves.

“I will now be happy to answer your questions.”

“Were there improvements in the Arions’ weapons since their attack on Andros?”

“I consulted with Kalla with regard to the Arion weapons used during the attack on Andros. We agreed that there have been significant advances since then. The details are in the report I alluded to.”

There was a murmur among the delegates and great landholders. There would have to be provisions to counter this in the next Armaments bill.

“Was there any evidence of Vendorian technology?”

“There was not. The Arions would surely have first used it in the hulls of their ships, but these were of ordinary steel and yielded easily to our bodies.”

This brought sighs of relief. Having stolen Vendorian technology themselves, and used it to their advantage during the Arion attack on their system, the Androssians were naturally much concerned that the Enemy might do the same.

“Do you think this is the start of a new Arion offensive?”

“The only thing I can say is that it took the Scalantrans completely by surprise. So, I have no way of knowing if it is new offensive, but it seems to be a new tactic.”

Reaction this time was muted. There was no way of telling whether this related to any but the traders—with whom Andros was competing in some systems.

And so the questions continued and Ju’lette did her best to answer them, although many were outside her expertise. Finally, a signal was given indicating the end of the session and she once again thanked them for allowing her to appear before their august body.

When Ju’lette left the chamber, she was accosted by the media. Their questions were not on the same level as those she had just been subjected to. Rather, they prodded her to get personal details. She didn’t really want to answer their questions, but felt that as a guest on their world, she couldn’t ignore them completely.

“Why did you become a Companion?”

“I was very young, only sixteen, when I entered the Companions’ Academy. I thought it would be a great adventure and a chance to have an interesting life and do something significant. And of course, it was my parents wish that I do so.”

“What was it like being indentured to that traitor?”

“It wasn’t pleasant. He was a cruel man. Of course, I didn’t know that when I agreed to become his Companion. And you must remember that he couldn’t hurt me. But it was difficult watching him mistreat everyone and not being able to do anything about it. Also, I wasn’t able to be of any use, so it felt as if all my training was wasted.”

“How did you like Nova Iberia and its people?”

"They were very strange. They had this religion, sort of like the Orthodox here, with all kinds of rules that they were supposed to obey and rarely did — especially Alfonso and his men. I didn't actually get to meet many of them, until after we had to fight the Arions. But they were brave — most of them did not want to live under the Arions and some died defying them, knowing the odds. Liz'bet knew two such men, very close to her and hers."

"Can we expect a visit from Liz'bet?"

"Even though her indenture has been nullified, she chooses to remain there."

At that point, Tassos appeared and she was able to use that as an excuse to get away from the media.

9. Island Idyll

Tassos knew of a very small, but lovely, island off the coast near Feodoropolis. It was so small that there was nothing on it except one cabin. This was where he was taking Ju'lette. He kept a small sailing boat in the harbor and they packed it with all the supplies they would need for their sojourn.

Ju'lette stretched out on the deck enjoying the warmth of the sun. She would have liked to remove her clothes, but she didn't want to distract Tassos. She enjoyed watching him skillfully maneuver the boat.

After two hours, they arrived at the island and beached the boat. They carried the supplies to the small cabin and put everything away. They then looked at each other, stripped, joined hands and ran to the beach, continuing into the surf. They swam a while, enjoying the cool freshness of the water.

Ju'lette went onto the beach and lay down in the sand. She lay on her back, her arms and legs invitingly outstretched. Tassos also got out of the water and stood for a moment gazing at her as the water lapped up and over her, covering her to her breasts and then receding. He joyfully accepted her embrace and the waves of water and waves of pleasure broke over them again and again.

They spent their time swimming, exploring the island, talking and of course making love. Ju'lette told him more about her life on Nova Iberia and reached back into her memory to tell him amusing stories about the Companions' Academy. And Tassos told her of his life since returning to Andros; of his growing interest in mosaics and his study of other cultures.

On one of their walks on the beach, Ju'lette turned to Tassos and said, "You have a very high position for a man of your age. How do you explain it?"

Tassos answered: "I think being a Lottery Boy had a lot to do with it."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, we have a very active media here. They made celebrities out of us when we were selected, saying how lucky we were and telling about our backgrounds. We gave interviews and being very young, said some very stupid things. The more explicit magazines ran articles speculating on the delights we were to receive. Some even found tall girls who were blonde or became blonde and posed naked, pretending to be Vels.

"Then, when we returned they met us and again made a fuss about us. The more respectable media just talked about how lucky we had been. The others wanted explicit details. Some of the boys did go into details — you could tell that they had rehearsed it in their minds over and over again on the way back to Andros.

"When they asked me, I said 'It was better than anything you could possibly imagine. And that is all I will ever say.' And that was all I ever *did* say — to anyone."

Ju'lette looked at him, as if seeing a great truth revealed. "You are a wonderful man, Tassos Vakros", she said, and kissed him tenderly.

Ju'lette had brought along one piece of jewelry that Don Alfonso had given her. It was a heavy necklace of white gold. She hadn't kept it for sentimental reasons, but had done so for its special properties. Night was falling when she decided that the time to use it had arrived. She went into the cabin and exchanged it for her usual gold necklace.

When she came out, she grabbed Tassos' hand and said: "Watch me Tassos. You're going to enjoy this show." Then she started running and leaped into the air. She flew around, keeping close enough so he could see her.

Ju'lette soared and tumbled and twisted in the air, letting him see her body in all its wonderful aspects, her lovely blonde hair flowing in the wind. She saw Tassos gazing at her, a look of wonderment on his face. Did he know how good she felt when flying naked — how free?

Then she came back and landed right in front of him, her body framing the setting sun.



“How would you like to join me?”, she said. “Of course, we can’t do any aerobatics, but you can fly with me.”

“You know I’d love to, Ju’lette. What do I have to do?”

“Just put your arms around me, I’ll hold on to you.”

So they soared into the air together and Tassos experienced the exhilaration of flight for the first time.

“Oh Ju’lette, this is wonderful.”

She saw that flying with his body pressed against hers had made him ready for the next stage of the adventure.

“It can be even more wonderful,” she said, moving her hips upward.

When she had her cunt positioned at the tip of his engorged cock, he exclaimed “Ju’lette! You’re not going to”

“I most certainly am,” she said as she lowered herself onto him. She kept her hips still for a few moments, so they could just savor the feeling. Then she started moving languidly, steadily. She wanted to abandon herself to the feeling completely, but she knew that was not possible. She was invulnerable, but flying wasn’t automatic and she needed to remain in control enough to keep them from plunging to the earth. But she held him tightly to her and kept on moving and they felt the air caressing their bodies, flying together as one, their bodies intertwined in the most intimate way possible.

He was having a hard time keeping himself from moving with her, but knew that she had to be in complete control in the air. He saw the stars above them and the island and sea below them and he wondered how he could be so lucky to be suspended between sky and earth, being made love to by a goddess.

They were screaming in ecstasy and they came together. He shouted “Kai tamoor’sk Ju’lette, kai tamoor’sk” , while she yelled “Tassos, Tassos, s’agapo, s’agapo”, declaring their love in each other’s language.

Luckily, she had flown fairly high before they climaxed, for they were now spinning, spinning, heading towards the earth. She regained control in time to swoop upwards again. “Don’t worry, my darling,” she whispered to him, “I’ll never let any harm come to you.” And she gently glided back to earth and landed not far from their starting point.

They stood and held on to each other, gazing at each other in wonderment, trying to get used to the idea that the other had said the magical words: “I love you”.

The night was very mild, mild enough for Tassos to want to sleep outdoors. They went back to the cabin to find a blanket and spread it outside. They lay there for a while, just gazing at the stars. Tassos pointed about a third of the way up from the horizon. “Do you see those two bright stars? About midway between them is Velor’s sun. So far away ... I sometimes find it hard to believe that I actually went there. “

10. Ties That Bind

When they came back from the island, Tassos spent most of his free time with Ju'lette. She was staying at *The Olympus*, the best inn in Feodoropolis. He showed her around the city and gave her thorough lectures on the exhibits in the museum. Some of the exhibits didn't hold her interest, probably because she didn't understand the historical context. But she thought the tapestries beautiful and she particularly liked the exhibit on the history of mosaics.

Tassos often talked to her about his family. She had trouble keeping them all straight in her mind — so many siblings, and aunts and uncles and nieces and nephews. He wanted her to meet them, but she put it off, feeling nervous about meeting them. Finally, she gave in and agreed to accompany him to a family gathering.

His mother had done her usual excellent job of cooking a small feast. His brothers, sister, their spouses and their children were there along with several aunts, uncles and cousins. They were all polite as they would be to any exotic guest. They asked her questions about Velor and Nova Iberia. The children wanted her to show off her strength and even asked her to fly, but she said she wasn't dressed properly for that.

When most of the guests had gone home, Tassos took Ju'lette back to *The Olympus*. After a quick kiss he said: "I hope you had an enjoyable time."

"Oh yes. The food was delicious and I enjoyed playing with the children. They were really sweet."

"I don't want to leave you, but I really have to go back home now."

"It's all right, Tassos. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Sure, I'll see you for dinner."

When he returned home, he found his parents and his older brother Phillip sitting in the kitchen.

“Well, what do you think of her?” he asked.

“Beautiful,” his father, Hektor, said.

“Gorgeous,” Phillip said.

“She was very nice, and the children really liked playing with her,” his mother said.

“I’m glad you liked her. I think she’s wonderful.”

“Well, of course,” Hektor said. “You’re very lucky. Any man would want her.” Tassos could see how uncomfortable his father was, as if he could feel his wife’s eyes boring into him. “Oh, don’t look at me that way, Zenobia. Any man who said he didn’t want her would be sick or lying. Even old Uncle Adonis, who can hardly see or move, had a silly grin on his face when she was introduced to him.”

“It’s more than that Father. I love her and she loves me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Tassos. It’s not love, it’s lust. And you’re lucky to have your lust satisfied.”

“No, Father. I’m serious. We really love each other. I want to go with her when she leaves Andros. I want to spend my life with her.”

Tassos could see the vein in his father’s temple pulsating. “Grow up Tassos,” Hektor shouted. “You’ve had your fling. Now it’s time to settle down. Get married and have a family. There are plenty of girls who’d be happy to marry a fine young man like you. This conversation is at an end. I’ll hear no more of it. Come, Zenobia. It’s time to go to bed.” And with that, he grabbed his wife’s hand and led her out of the room.

Tassos turned to his brother. “*You* must understand how I feel, Phillip.”

“Yes, Tassos. I can understand. But think about it some more. She might love you now. But think about when you grow old. She’ll still be as young and desirable as she is today. Do you think she’ll still love you when you can’t get it up anymore?” He put his hand on Tassos’ shoulder. “I only want you to be happy. Please don’t do anything rash. And think about how Mother will feel if you leave Andros and she never sees you again.”

Tassos went to bed that night with a heavy heart.

All during dinner the next evening, and even while they were making love, Ju'lette felt that Tassos was not his usual self. "What's troubling you", she asked.

"Last night, I told my parents that we loved each other and wanted to be together. I didn't really expect them to greet the news joyfully, but I didn't expect Father to be so vehemently against it and to be so angry. And I don't even want to think about what Phillip said."

"Phillip seemed very nice. What could he have said that was so terrible?"

"He said you wouldn't want me when I was old."

11. Kalla's Revelation

Kalla had been surprised by Ju'lette's request to see her but she could tell by her voice that Ju'lette's need to see her was urgent.

She held out her hands to Ju'lette. "What is troubling you, my child?"

"Oh, Kalla. I don't know what to do. I was trained to be a Companion. I knew the rules. I knew how I was supposed to behave. But that part of my life is over and I don't know how to behave in this situation."

"Calm down Ju'lette. I assume you're talking about you and Tassos. I know the two of you are enjoying each other. What's the problem?"

"We love each other Kalla, but I think my love will eventually hurt him terribly. He says he wants to spend his life with me and his family is terribly against it. His brother told him that he would grow old, I wouldn't, and then I wouldn't want him anymore. Maybe I should break it off now before he becomes even more attached to me. Let him live a normal life on Andros."

"How would you feel if you did that?"

"Oh, I know I would miss him terribly and it would pain me to see the hurt in his eyes when I break it off. But I could live a very long life off Velor or maybe have a life on Velor. I don't know. Is it better to hurt him now or hurt him worse later? I'm so confused. There are no rules for Vel and frail except when the Vel is a Companion. You have so much more experience than me, Kalla. Please advise me."

Kalla sighed. "I can't tell you what to do. But I can tell you about an experience that might help you." She led Ju'lette to a chair and then sat down facing her. She took a deep breath and then began speaking.

"I have told you before about how I protected the Andros family from Kyros, But there was something I left out, something I have never told and never would tell to any but you — for reasons you will come to understand.

"It was in the course of protecting the family that I met Alexius, the junior son of a junior brother. It was love at first sight. It didn't matter that I was nearly ten times his age, for my body was still young, and I felt young at heart again teaching him all the pleasures of the flesh.

"He was so beautiful and so brave. Shortly after Nestor came to the throne, he got into flying. No, not *that* kind. We had aircraft by then, and Alexius wanted to be a test pilot. His family tried to talk him out of it; *I* tried to talk him out of it. But his heart was set, and how could I deny him his freedom?

"Yet I was afraid for him, the more so because of my love for him, greater than any I had ever experienced with any other man. I'd enjoyed my relationships with Feodor and Jayar; they were good men, even great men, and they knew how to pleasure me in every way. But with Alexius, there was a whole new dimension.

"To think of him braving his frail body in such frail craft -- it was *heroic*. He was my hero. And when he was on the ground, we fucked and fucked as if there were no tomorrow. But I wanted there to be a tomorrow, a thousand tomorrows. I fantasized that he was Velorian -- that I could love and keep him forever.

"One day, he returned unexpectedly to the country estate we shared. Something had gone wrong with his plane; he'd had a hard landing. He made light of it, but I could see that he was limping, that he had a bandage on his leg. I was terrified, but tried not to show it. I think he was terrified too, for he wanted to make love then and there, without even waiting for me to put on gold.

"It was senseless; he could never penetrate me in my natural condition. But that wasn't what he wanted then; he wanted to experience my invulnerability. As soon as he

ripped my clothes off, he had his head between my legs — licking and sucking and biting, reveling in the pleasure he could give me, knowing that nothing could harm me there or anywhere.

"I felt a strange sensation — of something waiting for release. It wasn't orgasm; for I was already coming and coming, my love juices filling his mouth as he assailed me. Whatever it was, I gave into it, let it happen. I felt a strange sense of fulfillment, but I had no idea what it meant.

"The next day, Alexius came down with a terrible fever. I summoned the best physicians from Feodoropolis, but none could diagnose his ailment, despite the wealth of medical lore left to us by the Surrogates and expanded on since. I was beside myself with panic — and anger: to lose him, to lose him this way. It would have been more fitting had he died in a crash....

"But on the third day, he rose. He seemed perfectly normal — until he inadvertently began to smash the furniture. He looked at himself in puzzlement, then looked at me. We began to experiment — gingerly at first, just small things: yes, a knife wouldn't cut his flesh. Yes, he could lift a boulder with only the slightest effort.

"He looked at me again, no longer with puzzlement but with absolute joy. He lifted me in his arms and speared me with his cock. Oh God, it was so heavenly — to know that his cock was as invulnerable as my cunt, to know that nothing could ever hurt him again. We made love for hours and hours — the Change had brought him super stamina with all the other gifts.

"We went crazy for a while after that — making love in bonfires and feeling the flames caress our bodies, turning the rocks of old moraine fields into gravel with our exertions. The only thing we couldn't do together was fly — the Change apparently can't create new organs as opposed to enhancing existing ones — but I could carry him into space, where we would bask together in the naked sun and make love in hard vacuum.

"We had tried to be discreet about our relationship, before the Change. We tried to keep it private afterwards. Only we couldn't.

"Nestor must have suspected from the start, even though he had no cause for complaint — I never neglected his bed at night if he called for me, however I spent my days. But I was a public figure; people were bound to notice that I was seen less at the Museum, and Alexius' family and friends.... So word got around. It wasn't a scandal, understand. Except for the Orthodox, Androssians are pretty relaxed about such things.

"But now — this new thing. This Change that had changed everything.

"I decided to confide in Nestor. He was a good man, a wise man, and I knew that I could trust him utterly. He put it to me plainly.

"It doesn't matter now,' he said. 'But what of 10 or 20 or 30 years from now, when he shows no sign of aging? That would seem to be the prognosis, given all the other signs. It could happen even sooner, if he survives some accident that should kill him. And he is a member of the family, however junior. That complicates things.'

"Indeed it did, and I hadn't seen it. Alexius' very existence could become a threat to the stability of Andros — the stability I had vowed to uphold, even during the tyranny of Kyros. Alexius had no political ambitions; I knew that. But how many others would believe it? How many others would look at him and see either a menace or a savior? Patriarchs were normal humans — they were born and reigned and passed like other mortals. But if there were even the *possibility* of a supremis patriarch.....

"Nestor spoke calmly and unemotionally. He said nothing to shame me, and yet I felt ashamed, even though I had done what I had done all unknowing. I felt that I had betrayed my duty — not the duty of a Companion, but a higher duty which I had freely chosen. I still loved Alexius — Skietra, how I loved him — and yet it had to end.

"He cried when I told him. Before and after our last night as lovers. In the morning, he was angry. He wanted to back out of it. But I argued and argued with him, and he

finally assented — out of love for Andros, for I can't imagine that he could have truly loved me any longer, after the way I treated him.

"The mechanics were simple enough. A staged plane crash. A funeral with a weighted coffin. A false identity and a disguise, a ticket offworld on the next Scalantran ship.

"I felt dead inside for years afterwards. People could see it. They put it down to boredom and lack of challenge, and nothing Nestor said or did contradicted that impression.

"Yet as I have said, he was a good man, and the proof of it is that he brought me out of my depression — by encouraging me to pursue my education in the arts and the sciences, the consequences of which were providential for Andros, as you well know."

"But what became of Alexius?"

"I don't know. I couldn't bear to know. Can't you see what I did to that poor man? Unless he found another supremis somewhere, he could never love again, for even under gold his seed would be deadly to any frail. What kind of a life can a superman have in a world of frails?"

"So what can I advise you? I have told you how the Change works. You know the risks; I cannot guarantee that Tassos would come out of the Fever. I have only my experience to guide me. I made discreet inquiries as to similar cases among Companions on other worlds, but have heard nothing definite.

"One consolation I have to offer, if you choose to take the risk, and succeed. It will be different for you than it was for me. You don't have any commitments, no reasons of state. You and Tassos can go anywhere, do anything. I hope you will, I wish I could. My life here has been a good one, all things considered. And yet...."

"And yet, what?"

“I would like to see other worlds before I die. Even see Velor again, after all these years.”

“Do you have any contacts there?”

“The Scalantrans have conveyed my reports. Perhaps somebody even reads them. I never hear back.”

“That somebody would know about what you’ve done for women here?”

Kalla smiled. “He’d know. But he’d probably wish he didn’t.”

She paused a moment.

“It wouldn’t help for you to bring any of that up when you reach Velor. Just a bit of friendly advice.”

“Even so, I imagine they’ll have to see things differently there soon. A lot of things.”

12. Ties That Unbind

Tassos and Ju'lette were lying on the bed in her room that night after their lovemaking, when Ju'lette decided to tell him about her visit to Kalla.

"Tassos, you must realize that I was very upset after our conversation last night. I didn't know what to do, so I went to see Kalla. I now know that there may be a way for us to be together— always.

"Kalla told me something in strictest confidence, so I can't give you details. But a long time ago, she accidentally found out that it's possible for a Vel to change a frail so that he too will be invulnerable and most likely long lived."

"How is that possible, Ju'lette?"

"I don't really know. But there seems to be something inside of us that we can pass on, which will do that. "

"Would you do that for me, Ju'lette?", Tassos asked, his face alight with hope.

"Wait — there's more I have to tell you. It can be very dangerous. The man she did that to was deathly ill for three days and she was afraid he wouldn't survive."

Tassos answered immediately: "I'll take the chance, Ju'lette. I'll do anything to be with you."

"I don't want your answer yet. I want you to think about it. Think about your life. Remember, I *must* go to Velor and of course you'd come with me and I don't know when, if ever, we'd be able to return to Andros. And you should talk to your parents again. If you decide to do it, we'll go to your country home and do it there."

"You're right. I'll try to talk to my parents again, even though I know it won't be pleasant. How do you do this?"

“Very simple. We do something that we love to do, only without my wearing gold. You eat me, and when I come, something is released in my juices and it will accomplish the Change. Just remember — you’ll be feverish and delirious for almost three days. And there’s no guarantee that it’ll work or that you’ll come out of it alive.”

Once more, Tassos was in the kitchen talking to his parents.

“Ju’lette has told me that there’s a way for her to make me invulnerable and as long lived as she is. It’s a dangerous process, but I’ve decided to do it. Then we can be together as equals. I will leave Andros with her.”

His father turned red in the face and started yelling. “You ingrate! After all we’ve done for you, you’re going to leave your family to go off with that whore.”

Tassos was struck to the core by his father’s words. “You never called Kalla a whore. You wouldn’t dare.”

“What has Ju’lette ever done for *us*? How dare you mention them in the same breath! I don’t want to hear any more from you. I forbid it. And if you go against my wishes, you will no longer be my son.”

And he stormed out of the kitchen.

His father’s words hurt Tassos, but he hadn’t really expected anything else. Still, he felt sad, and it dampened the high he had been on since hearing about the Change.

Tassos went to his room to see if there was anything there that he wanted to take with him, but all the possessions he valued were in his country home. Ju’lette had told him that his physique would change, so there was no point in taking any of his clothes.

When he went outside, he was surprised to see his mother waiting for him.

“It will pain me greatly to see you go, Tassos. But I know that you will never be happy here on Andros, married to an Androssian girl — and I want you to be happy. Go with

God my son, and may you have a happy life with Ju'lette." She kissed him tenderly on the forehead and then went back into the house.

Three days later they were driving back to Tassos' country home, having made all necessary preparations. Tassos had gone to his lawyer to change his will, knowing that there was a chance that the procedure wouldm't work and be fatal. He had wanted to leave his worldly goods to his mother, but that would be the same as leaving them to his father. He wanted his estate to go to his nieces and nephews, but they were all minors. He no longer trusted his brothers, so he made the unusual provision that his estate would be left in trust to his nephews and nieces and that Kalla would be his executor.

Tassos and Ju'lette were both nervous, and their conversation was stilted. They both thought of their first drive out to the country and about how much had happened since then; how much they had grown to love each other and how life without the other would now seem empty.

When they got there, they went through the house making sure Ju'lette knew where to find everything she and Kalla might need to take care of Tassos when the Fever began. She gathered together fresh linen, towels and some first aid equipment, in case he hurt himself while delirious.

When all was ready she said: "I called the inn in town — Kalla arrived ten minutes ago. We can begin whenever you're ready."

"There's no point in waiting then." He took her into his arms and said: "Whatever happens, Ju'lette, I want you to know that I love you with all my heart, and I'll never regret what we're about to do." He kissed her tenderly.

They went into the bedroom. She had removed the fine silk sheets and replaced them with cotton. They undressed and lay down on the bed together. For the first time, she removed her gold necklace and placed it on the bedside table.

He started stroking her gently and let his lips brush her breasts and then her belly. She opened her legs and he placed himself between them. He kissed her gently and then moved his tongue around her lips. Soon, he was licking and sucking her hungrily, She started to moan softly. They had always loved this activity, but the thought of what it could do to Tassos excited them to a feverish pitch. He sucked and nibbled her harder and faster, his breathing agitated.

Her moans turned to screams of ecstasy and she came and came. Then she felt a change in her body as if something deep inside her yearned to be released. "It's happening Tassos. NOW, NOW, lap up my juices, lap it all up." And then the feeling passed. She sighed and said: "It's over Tassos. It's done."

He stopped, then kissed her reverently and lifted his head. When he once again lay beside her he whispered, pleadingly: "Please put on your gold necklace, Ju'lette. I want you so badly."

For once in her life, Ju'lette felt completely sated. But she would not deny him. She put on her necklace and opened herself to him.

13. Fever Dreams

When Tassos fell asleep, Ju'lette got up and called Kalla as planned.

As soon as Kalla was let into the house, she took a look at Tassos and quickly stripped. "We haven't much time. The Fever will soon be upon him. Remember, all we can do is make him comfortable and let the Fever run its course."

Kalla was to be proven right, for soon Tassos was moaning and tossing in his sleep.

When he burned with fever, they washed him down with cool water. When his body shook with chills, they lay down on the bed with him between them, pressing their bodies

to him and sharing their heat. When he thrashed about in delirium, they held him firmly but gently, so he wouldn't injure himself. And when he lost control of his bodily functions and soiled himself, they cleaned him gently and changed his sheets.

And so it went for two days and into the third day, and the worried look never left Ju'lette's face. Early in the third day the fever broke and he lapsed into a deep but peaceful sleep.

Kalla turned to Ju'lette and with a twinkle in her eye said: "You know Ju'lette, when I've thought about a threesome, I always assumed that the man would be conscious."

Ju'lette was startled and gave her a quizzical look. Then she started to laugh, and laugh and laugh. When Kalla saw that Ju'lette was on the verge of hysteria, she took her in her arms, rubbing her back and talking to her soothingly.

"It's okay Ju'lette. It's okay. He'll be all right now. He's a strong man. He came through it fine. You don't have to use restraint any more. You can let go now."

And Ju'lette did let go, placing her head on Kalla's shoulder and sobbing softly. After a while she regained control of herself. "Thank you Kalla ... for everything."

"I just hope the two of you have made a wise decision and that you'll never regret it," Kalla said as she dressed to leave.

Just before leaving, she looked Ju'lette in the eye and admonished: "You'd better be good to Tassos. Remember, I'm the only other woman he knows who can take him on now. And I've seen what a fine man he is."

Ju'lette laughed: "Kalla, you're incorrigible — and wonderful. I've always intended to be as good to him as Velorianly possible — but now you've given me added incentive."

While Tassos slept, Ju'lette took the opportunity to freshen herself. She undid the ribbon which had kept her hair out of the way. She took a long, relaxing bath and

washed her hair, which she then brushed vigorously until it once again flowed luxuriantly down her back.

Then she sat and watched him sleep, imagining the life they would have together, even the children they might now have. It would not be easy, but she knew that they could work it out together and that it would be a wonderful adventure.

14. Sex and Civics

Kalla was happy to get back to her apartment. Although she could not be physically tired, she was emotionally exhausted. She needed to sort out the emotions surging through her. She hated to admit it, but she was jealous, envious of Ju'lette — so young, so in love, with a lifetime of adventure before her.

As soon as she closed the private door to her apartment, she went into her bedroom, stripped off her clothes and started to fill her tub with hot water. She'd had the tub specially built; it was deep and large enough to hold two people comfortably. Many a satisfying romp had begun here. She added fragrant oil and then stepped in, lying back and soaking out the tensions of the last three days.

It was a long time since she had really loved someone. Of course, she was never at a loss for lovers. She now preferred the company of more mature men to that of callow youths. She was secure enough that she didn't need to pick a man for his position. It was a man's intelligence, wit and charm that attracted her. And if she had any inkling that a man was trying to get to the Patriarch through her, she dropped him quickly and unceremoniously.

Androssian men tended to marry early, so the only unattached men of an interesting age were the occasional widowers, who kept that status for as short a time as possible.

But they still married for economic reasons or to solidify family ties, so monogamy was not expected of the men, especially when they were away from home. Most of her lovers were men from the provinces who were in Feodoropolis for business or governmental purposes. There was also the occasional artist, musician or artisan.

While she was relaxing in the tub, she heard the summons from the telephone she had recently installed within arms reach of the tub. She pressed the button to activate the speaker and was happy to hear the voice of Stefanos Mercouri, a man who had been her lover for several years now. He was of the landed gentry and had a seat in the Megalos Synodos. He was young for his position, in his mid 40's, and had progressive ideas for a man of his position.

“Stefanos – it’s good to hear your voice.”

“And yours Kalla. What are you doing now?”

“Luxuriating in my tub. Want to join me?”

“You know I’d love to, but I have a formal dinner meeting I have to go to. Can I come over after that?”

“Of course. Come over here and I’ll give you dessert.”

“I’d rather have you for dessert.”

Kalla laughed. “You’ll have that too Stefanos. See you later.”

When Stefanos arrived, Kalla was wearing a sheer green silk robe which clung to her body and a heavy gold chain around her neck. She gave him a welcoming kiss and led him to the couch. He was still wearing the formal robes required for a dinner meeting. On a low table was a plate of delicate cakes and a hot drink, similar to the tea that some of the aristocracy had tasted back on Earth. She poured the drink into delicate ceramic cups and they sipped and ate while sharing small talk.

When the cakes were consumed, he drew her to him. He parted the top of her robe and began kissing her breasts. She slipped her hand into his robe and began caressing him, her fingers entwined in his pubic hair. It was not long before she parted the robe and lowered herself onto him. She sighed deeply when she felt his full length inside her. She knew that they both needed quick release and she swiftly and expertly brought them both to a shattering climax.

Kalla then sat beside him and gently massaged his neck. “Now tell me, Stefanos, why you were so tense.”

“Well, Kalla, I hadn’t had sex since ...”

Kalla laughed. “Besides that Stefanos.”

“It’s been a madhouse Kalla. Ever since we heard about the Arion attack on Nova Iberia and especially since Ju’lette’s testimony. You know I’m on the military committee. We all know that something has to be done, but no one is exactly sure *what* should be done.”

“I know what it’s like. Some thought that since the Arion attack on Andros failed, they wouldn’t try again. And others said that because it failed, they’d come back again, but the next time will be with overwhelming force.”

“We’ve been studying Ju’lette’s report, trying to decide what to do. But one question that we have no way of answering is: is this really a new Arion tactic or have they tried it elsewhere? We don’t know what’s happening elsewhere — that’s the problem. I think we have to have some way of sharing information with other worlds; maybe some form of cooperation between worlds.”

“I think you’re right Stefanos. This is something I have to think about. Maybe there’s a way ... Right now, let’s just relax and forget about these problems for a while. Come join me in my tub.”

She carefully hung up his robe. These ceremonial robes were quite expensive and often handed down within the family. They were brilliantly colored and were often jewel studded and the material was a heavy silk brocade.

Once again she filled the tub with hot water. This time she added aromatic herbs which were said to be soothing to the nerves. The both got in and relaxed side by side for a few moments. Then she took a sponge that divers had harvested near one of the off-shore islands and scrubbed him down. She then gave him a thorough massage till all the tension was gone from his muscles.

When they were drying each other off in the bedroom, he whispered to her: "There's something from back home that I miss – my beautiful mare."

She took the hint and got down on the floor, resting on her elbows and knees, legs spread wide. He walked around, inspecting her. "What a fine animal, such a lovely mane." She tossed her head and whinnied. Then he stroked her back, from the top down to the hollow at the base of her spine and up again.

He walked to her rear and positioned himself between her legs. "Such fine legs." And he stroked them; first down the outside and then up the inside of her long lovely legs. "And I have never seen such fine hindquarters." He stroked the twin globes with both hands; first gently, and then with greater pressure, squeezing and kneading. And then he stroked the gate to paradise that lay between them. By then, Kalla and begun to moan in anticipation.

"And she is always ready to be ridden," he said as he lapped the juices dripping out of her. He was greeted by a cry of delight when he entered her. And then she gave him the ride of his life.

When they were lying on the bed together, basking in the afterglow and lazily caressing each other, he said to her: "There is something besides you that is missing out in the provinces."

“What is that, Stefanos?”

“You know I have two young daughters, but no sons. Most girls in my province are of the working class, and get only minimal education — enough to become good wives and mothers. Gregoras is a backwater in that, and the provincial government is standing on local autonomy. I want these girls to have the same opportunities as my own daughters. I know that women can get a higher education in Feodoropolis, but that doesn’t do any good if they don’t get the necessary preparation. You’ve worked for universal women’s education here on the mainland, can you help in my province?”

“I’d like to help you, Stefanos. Of course, you know it’s not just building schools, it’s convincing people there that girls should get the same kind education they get here. But I hope you’ll also support me on persuading Gregoras to reform provincial marriage law, too, do away with arranged marriages and give women a chance to wait until they’re ready and participate in the choice of a husband. That’s something that affects all classes, as you know from personal experience.”

“Of course, Kalla.”

“And another thing, when I’m on the island, there will be no personal relationship between us — strictly business. Of course, it would be nice if you found an unattached, good looking young man to show me around!”

“Agreed. I may not love my wife, but I wouldn’t want to hurt her.”

“Can you stay the night?”

“I’d love to, but I have an early business meeting and it wouldn’t do to show up in my ceremonial robe, so I’ll have to leave now.”

Shortly after Kalla gave Stefanos a good-bye kiss at the door, she heard a knocking. She looked out the peep-hole and saw Nicky, an artist who she saw occasionally. He was wearing his work clothes, which were spattered with paint. He held a bottle of wine in his hand.

She opened the door and admonished him: “Nicky, you know my rules. No dropping in without first calling.”

“I know Kalla, but I just finished a painting that was commissioned by the Patriarch and I wanted you to help me celebrate.”

Kalla thought about his creativity, both artistic and sexual, and decided to make an exception to her rule. Yes, she really was glad to be home.

15. Awakening

Tassos awoke from his sleep and looked around, remembering what had happened. He saw a glass of water on the table by the bed and reached for it. He closed his hand around it and was surprised to see it shatter in his hand. Ju’lette watched with apprehension as he picked up a piece of the jagged glass and raked it hard against his wrist. Nothing happened!

“Ju’lette,” he cried. “It worked!”

He grabbed Ju’lette’s hand and took her into the walled garden. “I’ve been meaning to get some men from the village to move the marble statue of Aphrodite to the other side of the garden. I don’t think I’ll need them now.” And he picked it up easily and moved it.

Then he grabbed Ju’lette by the waist, lifted her high above his head, and whirled her around and around, both of them laughing joyously. When he lowered her, she found herself skewered.

“Tassos – you’re as hard as Vendorian steel, but feel like burning hot flesh.” She wrapped her arms and legs around him, and they moved together until they both came with shouts of joyous ecstasy.

“Oh Tassos, you don’t know how frightened I was that you wouldn’t survive. This is glorious. Now lie down so I can do something I’ve been yearning to do.”

He obeyed and she straddled him. And this time she did not have to hold back, but rocked and rocked with all her strength and he was able to meet her every move with equal strength. They were surprised to find a shallow depression in the ground where they had lain.

They lay together and he caressed her lovingly. “Ju’lette, there’s a beautiful secluded waterfall not far from here. I want to go there with you and fuck you there, the power of water beating down on us.”

She returned his caresses. “Yes, Tassos. Then we must go back to the island, so I can fuck you at the bottom of the sea, the great weight of the water pressing down on us and the sea creatures watching us.”

“Yes Ju’lette. And I want to fuck you on the desert, the scorching sand beneath us and the sun blazing down relentlessly on us.”

“Oh yes Tassos. And then I want to fuck you on top of the highest snow capped mountain, to feel the cold snow on our bodies, the heat of our passion melting the snow.”

“And I want to fuck you in a thunderstorm, feeling the charge of the electricity, hearing the thunder which would almost be loud enough to drown out our ecstatic screams.”

“And I want to go out on the ocean with you in a hurricane; body surf in with you and then fuck you on the beach, the rain pounding down on us, the wind howling and the waves crashing over us.”

“Ah, Ju’lette. I want to fuck you on every planet known to man and some yet to be discovered.”

“Tassos, I want to fuck you flying in the air above those planets, and on their moons, and on the asteroids between planets, and near their suns.”

“Ju’lette, I want to fuck you in every conceivable place in every conceivable way.”

“And Tassos, someday I want to conceive and bear your child.”

“Only one?”

“At least one. And I want to explore the universe with you.”

“And I with you. And I will love you all the wonderful days that stretch ahead of us.”

16. Summit Meeting

Kalla looked out at the assembled guests. They sat in three groups.

On her right were Tassos and Ju’lette. On the table before them were cups of tea and some delicate cakes.

On her left were Stefanos Mercouri and his nephew Orestes, who was a student at the Great Academy. Orestes would translate for Stefanos whenever Velorian was spoken.

In the middle were the Scalantrans: Factor General Robinta, *Far Wanderer’s* Travel Captain Marpolom and Jonjerem. They sat on the long-legged chairs that were kept at the Palace specifically for the comfort of visiting Scalantrans.

In front of them was a table of the appropriate height with drinks and a type of pastry that Scalantrans liked. Robinta was fluent in vernacular Romaic and Jonjerem and Marpolom in Velorian, so they could translate for each other when needed.

When she saw that the refreshments had been consumed, Kalla addressed the group. “Thank you for coming here. As agreed upon, I will be recording this conference and will distribute copies of the tapes to all of you.

"We all agreed in preliminary conversations that the present situation with the Arions necessitates better communications. We need as much information as we can gather on the capabilities of the Empire and, more important, its intentions."

"Is there really any doubt as to the latter?" Ju'lette asked. "The worlds where you and I were assigned have both come under attack."

"Yet the assault on our system was more massive than that on Nova Iberia, even though it took place decades earlier. Since then, most Arion attacks have been directed at worlds without resident Companions, and such worlds the Empire has annexed with little or no resistance. Several others have fallen because their Companions lacked combat training and experience, or were simply overwhelmed. You have all been briefed about those."

"We have been pleased to keep you informed," Robinta said.

"Much credit belongs to the Scalantrans. Whenever they have been forced to withdraw from systems occupied by the Arions, they have never failed to record the details and to share them with us. Such is the case with Tanzrobi, which has only now been brought to my attention."

Tanzrobi? All but Kalla and the Scalantrans were taken aback.

"Word came today from the *Fortunate Passage*, which had learned the news from the *Spirit of Youth* at Meetpoint 22," Robinta told them. "We were greatly distressed at the news, as was her Ladyship when we informed her."

"A world populated by Terrans of African descent," Kalla said. "Seeded by the Galen themselves, rather than their Surrogates. The Azizi, for so they are named, are warriors themselves. Protos, enhanced by the Galen centuries ago, before the Velorians, let alone the Arions. That the Empire would attack their world is most disturbing. That there was no response from the Galen is even more disturbing."

"The Galen never respond to anything," Ju'lette said. "They have withdrawn from all contact – with us, with anyone. Perhaps they no longer exist."

"Oh, they exist," Kalla said. "The Geheimites have dealings with them."

"There are certain worlds, certain regions, which we have been advised not to visit," Robinta added. "And not by the Arions. We have never seen these others, but we have seen tokens of their power, and acted accordingly."

"The retiring historian of the *Far Wanderer* will brief you regarding the Tanzrobians," Kalla said.

"I have prepared a summary of their history, tailored to the understanding of the rest of you," Jonjerem announced at this point. "We were trading with them long before Andros was anything but an uninhabited wilderness. The Azizi have much in common with the Arions; some of their bloodlines still preserve the equivalent of Primal strength and invulnerability. Most lie somewhere on a broad spectrum between Primal and Betan. They have always shunned high technology, preferring a simpler life as nomadic herdsmen, and this was their undoing: they could not fight in space, nor withstand the latest weapons of the Arions."

Jonjerem handed copies of his report to the others.

"You will note that the weapons used against Tanzrobi were a significant advance. We believe them to be effective against even Primes, and therefore...."

Kalla and Ju'lette didn't have to ask what the "therefore" meant.

Tassos turned to his love. She looked shaken. He had never seen that look on her before. She was apparently about to say something when Stefanos spoke up.

"We must call an emergency session of the Synodos," he declared.

"And tell them what?" Kalla asked. "That you are now defenseless? That worlds with Companions are as helpless as those without?"

"Velor must be informed of this. Surely Velor will have an answer."

"That is precisely why we need Ju'lette. She intends to travel to Velor in any case. But that journey is now urgent."

"It was always urgent," Ju'lette responded, having recovered herself. "I don't believe that the Senate and High Council appreciate what is happening out here. They still look upon the Companions as full time mistresses and part-time warriors at best. But a great war is coming; that is even clearer now than it was before. Velor must be prepared to fight; it must be prepared to send full-time warriors to protect the worlds that we have come to cherish."

"We will need further intelligence," Kalla said. "Intelligence from within the Empire. But how are we to obtain that, save through —"

"Trade with the Arions?" Robinta reacted. "Unspeakable! Unthinkable!"

"You must speak of it and think of it, nevertheless."

"They would never believe..."

"They'd believe that you would do anything for a profit. That you wish only to profit in trade with worlds from which you are now excluded."

"That would put us in great danger."

"You will be in greater danger still, should the Arions acquire Vendorian technology. Which I dare say is only a matter of time. Do you really expect them to hold back when they can match you, or more than match you, ship for ship?"

Now it was Robinta's turn to look shaken.

"We have traded in this galaxy for thousands of years," she said sadly. "Never have we had to fear for our survival. But perhaps we do now."

"Velor," Stefanos said. "It still depends on Velor. You must speak to them, Ju'lette. You must speak for Andros and Nova Iberia and all the seeded worlds. You must speak for the Scalantrans, and even for the Vendorians — for I doubt not that the Empire has its designs against them as well."

"I will speak for all of you," Ju'lette promised.

17. Leavetaking -- Again

The *Far Wanderer* was set to depart Andros tomorrow and Ju'lette and Tassos were finally ready.

The time had passed quickly since Tassos' Change. They had spent several days together in the country. Tassos had spent much of the time getting used to his new strength and invulnerability, with Ju'lette always close by. After a couple of days, he could pick up a glass without thinking and not accidentally crush it. And he was careful not to show his new strength when there was anyone else around.

And at night they made wild love — mostly on the floor so as not to break the bed.

When they returned to the city, Tassos handed in his resignation to the head of the Trade Board. He agreed to stay on the job to train his replacement. This task was made simpler when his assistant was promoted to his position.

Once again he visited his lawyer. It made no sense to have a will, since his lifetime would stretch over many generations in the future. The land surrounding his country house produced a good income and the house could be rented to produce further income. He set it up so that the income could go into an account in one of the Scalantran banks.

In the evening they went to the house of Tassos' younger brother Apollo for a farewell dinner. His sister Helen was there with her family. Phillip and his family were also there. Ju'lette was glad that the brothers had reconciled before their departure. Phillip had made Tassos understand that his remarks were not meant to hurt Tassos or insult Ju'lette; he had merely been blunt to get Tassos to take a serious look at the situation.

The dinner went well. Once again, the children were fascinated by Ju'lette, with the older boys a little embarrassed by their physical reactions to her. Helen and his sisters-in-law were polite; they were secretly glad that she would not be staying on Andros, fearing their husbands' reactions to her.

After dinner, while they were eating their dessert, Tassos was surprised by the arrival of his mother. She came into the room and quickly kissed him on the forehead. "I can't stay long, Tassos. Your father thinks I've dropped in on a friend for a short visit. He'd be furious if he knew I was here."

Tassos brought over a chair so that she could sit next to him, and Leandra, Apollo's wife, brought her some tea and cake. "I'm so glad you came, Mother," Tassos said. "Sit with me for a while. We won't let you stay long enough to incur Father's wrath." He looked around the table and said: "I want you all to know that the one thing I regret about leaving Andros is the loss of my family. But you will always be in my heart."

Zenobia talked quietly with Tassos while eating her cake and drinking her tea. Then she said to Ju'lette: "All I ask of you is that you be good to my son." And Ju'lette did her best to reassure Zenobia. After a while, Tassos walked his mother to the end of the street and gave her a last farewell hug and kiss. He returned to the house looking subdued.

Parting was difficult, and accompanied by many affectionate hugs and kisses. His brothers and brother-in-law thoroughly enjoyed their farewells to Ju'lette, reinforcing the women's conviction that her continued presence on Andros would have had a disturbing effect on their families.

They returned to his country home so that they could have one last night there together and so that he could give final instructions to his overseer in the morning.

“Do you remember the first time we came here, Ju’lette? I was worried that I had created a fantasy woman in my mind and that I would be disappointed by the reality. How wrong I was! The reality was even better than I remembered — you had matured from a delightful girl into a wonderful woman.”

“It was the same for me, Tassos. Let’s go out into the garden and make love under the olive tree as we did that first night.”

And they spent the night there, loving each other, seeking now reassurance as well as pleasure, for they knew they faced a difficult journey and, at its end, a difficult challenge.

The initial, wild high that they had experienced after Tassos’ Change had eased. They’d had time to explore the extreme sex that his new invulnerability permitted. And they knew they had unlimited time together to fulfill their fantasies.

Tonight, they were content to express their love in quieter ways. And between acts of love they talked about their future: about what they hoped to accomplish on Velor and what they might do after their sojourn there.

END OF PART II

Read Part III: <http://brightempire.com/Homecoming-3.pdf>

Follow the parallel adventures of Vespvr Tal’esta in Shadar’s serial *First Protector* at:

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