

Judgment Day

A Conclusion to *The Mission*

By Brantley, mostly from Notes by Rob

[Chapter 9, Old Style]

Binkley's World, only recently liberated from the Aureans, faces a new attack by the Empire, without warning from an unexpected direction. Only Auxiliary Protector Oon'ah B'Té, and her lover, the flying Prime Xanthra, are on the scene to oppose the invasion – but they are fugitives, Oon'ah regarded as a traitor for freeing Xanthra from a POW compound. Col. James Kim'Vallara, commander of Velorian ground forces, had already figured out the truth about Xanthra, but tried to keep it to himself, as the Velorian-Aurean partnership program under the Theel'dara Initiative had never set

well with Binkleyan authorities or with the Protectors. Unknown to him, however, the secret has already been leaked to Velor by the chief of the Binkleyan Conciliate, Howard Jolie. Kim'Vallara has been stripped of his command, and is now powerless to delay a New Directive calling for liquidation of the Aurean POWs.

The Black Fleet was a deliberate misnomer,

The Aurean ships would have looked like Easter eggs, to a Terran's eye. But few on Aurea had any taste for eggs, and fewer still had any idea what Easter was. The colored patterns were simply the insignia of this particular detachment of seven capital ships.

Seven didn't sound like a lot, unless you knew that each carried sufficient armament to blast the surface of a planet to ashes – should that planet be foolish enough to resist, and planets generally weren't. Admiral Perm had every reason to be confident, especially after his command ship vaporized the Velorian picket before it could even raise its shields,

It had taken only moments to analyze and duplicate the picket's recognition signal. Scan as they might, none of the monitors of Velorian Fleet Command or Ground Command would notice their ship was missing until its next scheduled coded transmission failed to arrive, and by then...

The detachment had threaded the hole with scanners and antennae retracted; that was standard operating procedure for rough passages. But from here to Binkley's World, they expected a smooth passage. Very smooth.

The Aureans had no way of knowing what was waiting for them. Or, more precisely, *who*. Xanthra and Oon'ah had ensconced themselves, for the nonce, in their cometary hideaway, where the fugitive Auxiliary Protector amused herself by watching her warm breath turn to mist as she exhaled into the ultra-cold chamber they had created for themselves.

But they were keeping track of time. They'd know when to make their move.



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The orders didn't make any sense. Fleet Command didn't have any authority over Ground Command, and the Conciliate had authority over neither.

Colonel James Kim'Vallara had been tempted to ignore the order to repair to quarters. But his guards had advised him that the invasion was real – that an Aurean detachment had

entered the Binkleyan system through a barely-guarded wormhole. Disputing even patently unlawful orders could only distract Velorian forces from their primary duty.

“Please inform Commodore Korzel that I take exception to this, and will pursue the matter through the proper channels as soon as the emergency is ended.”

The guards actually saluted him, and he returned their salute.

At least Bidu is safely away, he thought. But how high does this go? Will they even listen to her at Velor?

With nothing else to do, he began preparing a report, explaining every action he had taken on Binkley’s World, every order he had given, and the reasons for taking those actions and giving those orders.

* * *

Once upon a time, a single Protector could have smashed an Aurean ship as if it really had been an Easter egg. But that was once upon a time.

True, even Vendorian steel could not resist forever the might of an enhanced Velorian. But it took time, and Oon’ah knew that she and Xanthra didn’t have time. Once upon a time, a Protector might have laughed at the power of even ship-mounted weapons. Oon’ah knew that was no longer the case – the Battle of Klas’ten, before she was born, had proved that.

But the commander of the Aurean fleet, whoever he was, didn’t know about Xanthra, didn’t know that she herself had learned and memorized his ships’ designs, the placement of all the scanners and antennas and weapons ports. Nor did that commander suspect that the attack would be coming from behind, as the enemy formation passed the comet in which the lovers had ensconced themselves.

The fleet would be scanning forwards, looking for any sign of enemy ships or Protectors headed their way from Binkley's World. That would give Oon'ah and Xanthra an edge. Xanthra knew the patterns of the scanner and antenna outlets, and that would give them another edge.

An edge. Not a guarantee.

Together, they watched the Imperial ships lumber past. They had conserved their energy, remaining inside their hideaway most of the time, going over their strategy -- waiting for this moment.

Out, out and away!

Xanthra went for the flagship, positioned at the tip of the conical formation, soaring in a wide circle to approach its tail, then closing in to within a meter of the hull. The curvature of the ship hid the targets from her eyes as she made her way forwards, but she knew where they had to be.

When Xanthra hit the aft scanner of the flagship, she knew she really had to put herself into it. But while Vendorian steel was stronger than any other alloy in the known universe, it was not as strong as Prime flesh. It took determination to break that scanner, but break it did. Knowing what she was up against, she redoubled her efforts, smashing one antenna after another with her head, her legs, her breasts, her ass – whatever it took, whatever was most convenient -- working her way towards the prow and the foremost scanner.

Some of the weapons ports were opening; she attacked those with her heat vision to disable the ports and, hopefully, the energy and missile weapons systems within. Then she felt a sudden blast of heat; one of the other warships had drawn a bead on her, but she jiggled

out of the way just in time, and after a few moments its beam went out – Oon’ah must have gotten to it. Had the other ship been alerted by the commander before communications went down, or had its weapons crew simply been quick on the uptake?

The flagship still had its engines, she knew, but it was flying blind. Avoiding other possible lines of fire, she headed past prow, using the flagship as a shield, then reversed course to slam into it – off center rather than dead center. That left a supremis-size dent in the hull, but also sent the ship into a slow spin. The crew would try to compensate, but without scanners they’d have a devil of a time at it – and the other ships would be distracted.

Oon’ah had disabled one of the other ships, by the look of it, but the rest were bringing their weapons to bear. Xanthra had advised her to shield herself against the others, and hoped she’d followed that advice. The rest of the ships were turning in the Protector’s direction, perhaps believing only one supremis had been assailing them, and the Aurean took advantage of the distraction to knock out scanners and antennas on two of the ships bringing up the rear.

Half the ships of the Aurean fleet were milling about in confusion. But Xanthra knew that if the commander were worth his salt, he’d transfer his command to an undamaged ship, and see to it that any repairs that could be made were made as quickly as possible before the force renewed its advance. This was only a reprieve, unless they took a truly daring chance. They had lost the element of surprise, and the remaining ships had enough weaponry left to take them out.

Xanthra had advised Oon’ah to rendezvous with her by the prow of the flagship after 15 minutes, regardless of how much progress they had made. Now was that time. As her lover

approached, a questioning look on her face, Xanthra tapped herself on the head, then pointed to where the bridge of the crippled flagship must lie.

Her message was clear: *Take out the commander.*

* * *

The alarm sounded just as Mar'ek was finishing up with Cass'andra. What was already a quickie was about to turn into even more of a quickie. So much for his own quickie sundive!

Top Emergency!

Cass might have seemed oblivious to the alert, and yet the acceleration of her vaginal contractions proved otherwise: she wanted to cum, and feel him cum, *immediately.*

"Aiiiiieeee!" she screamed as her invulnerable cunt spasmed, desperate to extract every last measure of pleasure from his invulnerable cock. Mar'ek too screamed as he felt her milk his cum with all the might of her heavenly inner muscles.

With a sigh, it was then back to business,

"Got to run," she gasped as she relaxed her grip and let him pop out. "Got to fly."

It took a few minutes for him to find out what the alarm was all about; the Protectors were too busy scrambling for a briefing. A really *brief* briefing by Korzel. An Aurean attack through the wormhole – the *other* wormhole. It had taken hours for Fleet to realize what must have happened to the picket, but there could be no doubt that the enemy ships were headed straight for Binkley's World.

Adding to the confusion was the fact that some Protectors were still out there looking for Oon'ah and Xanthra, assuming that they would try to sneak through one of the wormholes.

But, after finding nothing, they were straggling back in, only to be told that they'd have to turn around and join the new mission. Those who came it late would provide a local defense force, just in case...

Fleet was already redeploying its ships to confront the attack, but the Protectors could travel faster than any ship – even a Courier ship. They had been trained for this, and they were up for it as they soared into the sky, flying in formation like migratory birds.

* * *

When word of the invasion reached the Conciliate, Howard Jolie was scared shitless.

Literally.

The Chancellor of the Conciliate was alone in his office when he dumped in his pants. Jolie was spared public embarrassment only by the fact that he also had a private bathroom; he made it there in time to pull down his trousers before the shit had time to leak through his underpants. He cleaned himself up as best he could, flushed the soiled underpants and pulled his trousers back up.

It was just in time, because an angry call came in from the chairman of the Council of Conciliators.

“What the hell is going on?” Orestes Wahloo wanted to know.

“I got the alarm only a few minutes ago,” Jolie insisted. “I don’t know any more than you do.”

“You should put the Militia on full alert.”

“A lot of good that will do, against an attack from space.”

“Do it anyway. At least you can use them to get rid of those Aurean prisoners, once and for all.”

“You don’t understand. They’re the responsibility of Velorian ground forces.”

“Well, get on the horn with them.”

“I can’t. Their colonel is under arrest.”

“So who the hell’s in charge?”

“Commodore Arved Korzel. But he won’t be reachable; he’s on the way with his ships to intercept the Aureans.”

“But the Militia—“

“Korzel assumed command of *our* ground forces, too.”

“That’s *illegal*.”

“Tell me about it.”

“We should send the Militia anyway. With an invasion on, the Velorian ground troops can hardly object to our cleansing the compound. We can tell them the order came from Korzel himself, and he’s in no position to deny it.”

It was tempting, but Jolie knew the flaw in the plan: surely such an order would have been issued directly to the Velorian ground forces. On the other hand, this was no time for him to appear weak and indecisive in their eyes – or the eyes of his own people. Perhaps he could bull his way through. After all, he had allies on Velor itself – allies who would come through for him, if only in their own interest.

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Smashing their way through the hull of the flagship, Xanthra and Oon'ah were met with a blizzard of debris as explosive decompression sent anything and everything that wasn't nailed down shooting out of the breach they had created.

Emergency doors must have been activated, but those would be made of ordinary steel and easy to deal with. Moreover, Xanthra knew the layout, knew which way the bridge lay. As in all warships, the bridge was well below the hull; it relied on electronics rather than ports for its vision, and those electronics would be receiving nothing.

When Oon'ah punched a hole through the first emergency door, she was frustrated for a few moments: something was blocking the hole. She worked rapidly, her hands like cutting tools, only to see that the body of a dead Beta was the cause of the obstruction. The body shot past her as soon as it had room to, and she and Xanthra flew down the next corridor.

It was much the same at the next emergency door, and the next. But when they reached the entrance to the bridge itself, a strange thing happened: the door opened for them, the air rushing out without any action on their part. Behind that door stood a strange figure.

It was not Admiral Perm.

* * *

Shad'rah, the most powerful among the Protectors, flew point.

The sun was a few degrees off their path, and that meant they'd be able to make a near pass to recharge their orgone without losing too much time. But they couldn't afford to linger; they'd have to soak up the sun on the run.

There hadn't been time to plan it all out, to make precise calculations. But Shad'rah had worked it all out in her head; her brains were as awesome as her body. All the others had to

do was follow her lead, as she took them as close in as she dared. The radiation bathed their incredible bodies, making them even more incredible as it deepened they tans and swelled their breasts.

Char'lene, halfway back in the left wing of the formation, thought of Mar'ek as she filled up on orgone. Mar'ek, who had restored her confidence with his words and his cock. Now she felt that nothing could defeat her. First, she'd see to the Aureans, and then she'd see to him – with enough energy left, she hoped, to fuck him till he begged for mercy. It would all be in fun, of course; she knew he'd enjoy the hell out of being 'raped,' of feeling her cunt making him come and come and come...

Then Protector discipline cut in. *Focus*, she told herself. There's a war out here.

* * *

Colonel James Kim'Vallara hated writing reports. Especially this one.

He'd given up on it several times, but then forced himself to go back to it. The hardest part was explaining what he had known and when he had known it – and why he had then done nothing about it.

He wasn't a fool, he told himself; he'd realized early on that Xanthra R'N was something special. That was why he'd paired her with Oon'ah B'Te, who had obviously become her lover as well as her debriefing officer. But while patting himself on the back for not being a fool, he'd made a monumental fool of himself by keeping his knowledge to himself. It was dereliction of duty at the very least.

He hadn't informed Velor, but *somebody* had. Maybe not about Xanthra herself, but about the whole fiasco of the program. How could he ever have expected the resentment

among the Protectors and from the Conciliate *not* to have gotten out? And then there was the business about the gladiatorial combat at the space raid shelter; if word of that hadn't reached Velor yet, it surely would.

Shit, he thought. I'm really in it.

As if on cue, more shit arrived at his office.

"Colonel?" came a voice as the door of his quarters slid open.

It was Group Captain Dan'l Auray, who commanded a squad of Velorian ground troops as opposed to the Protectors.

"Is this just a social call?" Kim'Vallara asked. "I've been relieved of my command, as you surely know."

"Sir, I don't know who else to take this to. The Binkleyan militiamen are at the gates of the Compound. They say they have orders to carry out the executions of the enemy combatants."

"Orders from whom?"

"Commodore Korzel, of course."

Kim'Vallara's heart sank. All his work had come to this. He might as well be executing the Aureans himself. But he was in no position to second guess, let alone countermand.

"He's your commanding officer. Why come to me about it? Follow his orders."

"But sir, we haven't actually *seen* his orders. Have you?"

"Why would he send them to me? If you're in any doubt, ask the Militia for a hard copy."

“We tried that,” Auray told him. “They said the hard copy was back at the Chancellor’s office. We can’t contact the commodore; the time lag for a response would be too long, and the ships are observing radio silence until...”

“Confirm the orders if you believe you must, then follow them. I don’t have the authority, in this matter or any other. You could be sanctioned for even approaching me. Out.”

Auray turned and left, not bothering to salute.

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The woman standing just past the entrance to the bridge regarded them curiously as she touched a control button. The door closed behind them. The woman touched another button and air began flowing into the enclosure.

The Aurean woman obviously didn’t need to breathe, any more than Xanthra and Oon’ah. That could only mean she wanted to talk. As Xanthra looked past her to the admiral’s seat, she saw that he was dead, just like the Betas who lay about him. His head was twisted at an angle impossible for anyone living.

“Tset’lar,” Xanthra said, after the air came up enough to carry sound. Oon’ah said nothing, but was clearly frozen in fear.

“Of course,” confirmed the most feared living weapon in the Aurean arsenal. “My name is Lee’za.”

There weren’t supposed to be any more tset’lars. The Galen had proscribed them, so it was said, along with the Sara’yen, the living counter-weapon developed in the Velorian genetic laboratories. The genetic arms race was supposed to be over.

Apparently it wasn’t.

Xanthra looked at the dead admiral again,

“Of course,” repeated Lee’za. “The Empire does not reward failure.”

She paused for a moment.

“Unfortunately, I must ‘reward’ the two of you as I ‘rewarded’ him. But I have to admit to some curiosity. I hadn’t been under the impression that a mere Prime could fly, let alone that one would consort with the enemy.”

“They’ve got to keep the genetic engineers happy back on Aurea. They were working on enhanced kintzi for a while. Really beautiful, really smart and really deadly. Unfortunately, one of the consignments got away. Heads rolled. You probably heard about that. Anyway, those whose heads didn’t roll needed something to do, and they’d done about all they could with the Tanzrobians, so it was back to Square One.”

“Am I supposed to believe any of this?”

“I came out of the labs myself. They figured out a way to implant volatai in primal stock. Somebody thought a lot of flying Primes would be more effective than a few tset’lars. Trouble is, they overlooked one problem: those flying Primes might fly the coop.”

“You being one of them?”

“Not really. But there was a Prime attached to the lab who was really hot for me when the Empire turned cold on the project and decided to terminate the results. I wasn’t hot for him, but it sure beat being chained in gold and hauled to an extermination chamber. He got me a false chip as a Beta comfort woman, so that I could stay with him. But then he was transferred and I was thrown on the open market, so to speak. I ended up here.”

“And what about her?” Lee’za asked, gesturing towards Oon’ah.

“She—“

“We love each other,” Oon’ah broke in. “You can kill us, but you can’t kill that.”

“Indeed, I can kill you. Just for your love, I *should*. It is an abomination.”

“My people agree. We didn’t want to be part of the war any more. We just wanted to *be*. On a neutral world. Wherever. And then your people came along.”

“How inconvenient!”

“Just the breaks,” Xanthra commented. “But we didn’t want the people the Binkleyans to go through Aurean occupation all over again.”

“How touching. It makes me want to cry.”

“You’ll want to cry a lot more if you go through with the attack. Velorian Fleet Command knows about you now. Their ships will be coming. So will the Protectors,”

“*Auxiliary* Protectors,” Lee’za huffed. “Your friend is one of those, am I right? I could take her out in 20 seconds.”

“Could you take out two dozen of her? If they were all attacking at once? They’re trained for that sort of thing, you know. And one of them’s ultra-enhanced. Beat your best Prime one-on-one in the arena back on the planet. There wasn’t much left of him. He’s lucky to be alive.”

“She’ll be no match for me, even if what you say is true. It’ll be fun wiping her out, wiping out the whole contingent.”

“True, you might kill some of them,” Oon’ah chimed in. “You might even kill all of them. But while you’re doing that, our fleet will be wiping out the rest of your ships. They’ll be outnumbered and outgunned. And you’ll be all alone here, trying to rule a planet, rule an

entire system, single-handed. You won't be able to fly home for help, because the people here would rise again. You'd have to explain, too, why you were the only one to survive the mission. The Emperor would want to know. I don't think he'd be pleased."

"Do you two pathetic creatures really think you can intimidate me?"

"You can be a heroine in the Emperor's eyes," Xanthra offered. "Save what's left of your fleet, and take all the credit. All the blame can fall on the admiral. He's in no shape to testify. And the rest of the people on your ships will be grateful. They'll go along with whatever story you tell."

And so the duel of words and wits unfolded.

* * *

It was a stand-off outside the Compound, where a dozen Velorian troopers had taken up guard duty after the New Directive had arrived. The militiamen outnumbered them ten to one, but they were mere frailts.

Arriving back from HQ, Group Captain Auray had again implored his opposite number, Company Chief Valter Malaise, to provide a hard copy of Korzel's orders. Malaise insisted that this wasn't necessary, and demanded that the Velorians step aside.

"You are interfering with a lawful order of your own command," he challenged Auray. "We have suffered under these criminals, and you have not. It is only just that we Binkleyans should be the ones to take the responsibility for the fate they richly deserve."

Malaise was talking to his own men as much as to the Velorian, and they began muttering in approval.

"Kill them!" on shouted, and others took up that shout until it became a chorus.

Nobody could see “them” from the front gate; the Aurean prisoners were all confined to the barracks behind gold bars and shackled with gold chains. But they must have heard the shouts outside, and Malaise and Auray and their troops all knew it. As if in confirmation, a distant voice made itself heard from the barracks.

“Fuck you, Binkleyan swine.”

One of the militiamen lost it then, firing his energy pistol at the barracks and blowing a hole in the wall. One of Auray’s men jumped in front of him, taking his next shot, but things were getting out of control as other Binkleyans began firing.

“Cease fire!” Malaise ordered belatedly, but he could hardly be heard.

“Cover them!” Auray shouted as his men, but there weren’t enough of them to cover all the Binkleyans, and he soon realized that.

“Pistols at low setting,” he ordered then. “Rake them.”

That did the trick, as the Binkleyans cried out in pain and dropped their weapons.

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Shad’rah and the other Protectors were surprised, to say the least, when they arrived at the wormhole to find only three Aurean ships -- those disabled and, under closer examination, deserted.

They were even more surprised to find Xanthra and Oon’ah, doing a 69 in hard vacuum, seemingly oblivious to all around them. Once Shad’rah got their attention, however, they were willing to accompany her to Korzel’s ship for a debriefing.

Korzel found it hard to believe any of it.

“So what you’re telling me is, you talked a *tset’lar* into taking the rest of their task force back home?”

“We made her an offer she couldn’t refuse,” Xanthra said. “And if you don’t believe that, you have to at least believe your own eyes. She left those three ships behind, after having their crews transfer to the others.”

That was hard to argue with. But under the New Directive, he was still obligated to treat Xanthra and Oon’ah as fugitives and return them to captivity on Binkley’s World. “We’ll sort it all out there,” he promised. “For now, my hands are tied. But I’m taking it on my own authority to put a hold on any further action against you or the POWs at the Compound. I can’t imagine that Star Marshall Raul’lan would order otherwise, given the current situation.”

And so they returned to Binkley’s World in triumph, even if they would have to suffer gold bars and gold chains until everything was sorted out.

But their triumph was short-lived.

* * *

Colonel James Kim’Vallara was still hunkered down in his quarters, putting the finishing touches on his report, when the news came. He hadn’t been following the news, actually. But the news had a way of following him.

First there was a visit from Jeff Hard’n, chief civilian staffer attached to Ground Command, who told him about the confrontation at the Compound. So that was what the distant sound of energy fire had been about. He hadn’t wanted to ask, fearing that it meant executions of the prisoners were underway. He felt a mixture of relief and anxiety – an armed clash between Velorians and Binkleyans didn’t bode well for the Enlightenment.



Kim'Vallara's second visitor was Cass'andra, one of the Auxiliary Protectors, who had alighted on the roof of the headquarters building and made her way to his office from there. She had been chosen by lot from among those just returned from the mission to defend the wormhole. She hadn't had time to dress, except for some heels she later said she'd also won by lot, and she didn't look all that happy.

"First the good news," she told him. "We won."

Kim'Vallara gave a sigh of relief.

"Now the bad news. It wasn't really us. It was Oon'ah and Xanthra. They got there first. But Admiral Korzel isn't cutting them any slack. They're back in custody at the Compound. The Aureans are gone, but Korzel can't say for sure they're gone for good. The story those two told him about a tset'lar taking over command and then letting them talk her into leaving is pretty far fetched. Maybe it's true; it's hard to make up things like that. Or maybe the whole thing was staged. They must have known we were coming."

"Is there any evidence to support their story?"

"The Aureans left some disabled ships behind, but they could be booby-trapped – Korzel's going to have some of us check them out. If they're safe, he'll have technicians from Fleet do the necessary repairs and bring them back here. If they aren't safe, we'll try to disarm the booby traps without setting them off, and then it'll be up to the techs. Either way, it could quite a haul. Maybe they could use them in stealth missions, but I figure the Aureans are bound to alert their planets. So maybe they could be used for training exercises at

Erin'dor or Atlantea. After all, they're the latest models. You've got to keep up, keep your edge."

"We'll need that. But chances are none of it will involve me. You know about that, don't you?"

"Some of us, myself included, think you got a raw deal. But others... well, they say you knew about Oon'ah and Xanthra all along. And they don't trust those two. You shouldn't have trusted them either, they say. They never liked this whole Pairing program anyway; even if you meant well, you were ramming it down our throats. L'yn even said you were ramming it up her pussy."

Kim'Vallara's face went red.

"But that reminds me. My own pussy needs servicing, and Mar'ek is charged up again and ready to go."

She hesitated a moment.

"I hope things work out for you. For you and Bidu."

And then she was gone.

His third visitor was Star Marshal Teri Raul'lan, in the flesh this time, having just arrived by Courier ship.

"Here's a fine mess you've gotten us into," were her first words. "You're not going to like what I'll have to do to get us out of it."

James was seemingly impassive, but actually numb.

This is what I have wrought, he accused himself.

* * *

She was only a projection, those assembled at the Compound knew. But even though she was a fifty feet tall, her appearance was that of living flesh. It was at once awe-inspiring and disturbing.

Breasts four feet across? How were men on the ground supposed to relate to that? How were they supposed as they gazed up at her crotch, her labia clearly visible against the tight fabric of her uniform? It was just an illusion, they knew, but still... Fortunately her words, which thundered across the countryside, addressed only serious matters.

'I am Star Marshal Terri Raul'lan, supreme commander of all Velorian armed forces, whether in space or on planets. I am empowered to render judgment in all cases of military law here. Furthermore, I have been empowered by the Senate to render judgment in all related matters involving Protectors, civilians and enemy aliens.'

Silence reigned among the Protectors and the ground forces and the prisoners,

"Item," declared the Star Marshal. "All Aurean prisoners are to be transported from this world to their place of execution. Authorities of Binkley's World need not be concerned with the time, place or means of execution, nor with the disposal of the prisoners' remains."

There was a murmur among the prisoners, but more of resignation than of anger. They had expected nothing less.

"Item: The traitor Oon'ah B'Té will share the fate of the Aurean prisoners. She is stricken from the rolls of the Protectors and from all records of the Protectors and Velor itself. It shall be as if she had never been; her name shall never be mentioned again."

Oon'ah, alone in a separate golden cage, said nothing.

“Item: Col. James Kim’Vallara is stripped of his rank and commission. His last orders are to return to Velor forthwith, there to await exile with his wife to whatever world the Senate in consultation with the general staff may determine. Neither he, nor his wife, nor any children of theirs ever be suffered to return to Velor.”

Dead silence greeted her words, among Velorians and Binkleyans and Aureans alike. The image winked out and the Star Marshal, back to normal size, made her exit flanked by escorts from Group Captain Auray’s squad.

* * *

They had converted one of the captured Aurean warships into a troop ship, not unlike those that had lately carried Velorian forces to Binkley’s World and other strategic planets.

But on this ship, there were no allied troops or their advisors, no legionnaires. Binkleyan shipyard workers had installed gold shackles along the walls, sufficient for the remaining Aurean POW’s – and one Protector, who was treated as an Aurean. Oon’ah was shackled at the far end of the hold from Xanthra, but they were thinking the same thing.

They could have killed us where we were. Why go to all this trouble?

No announcement was made, but they could tell from the vibration that the ship had lifted off. It would take days to reach the wormhole, even with the QED. Too long for the POWs to keep alive their fear and anger, which gradually degenerated into cynicism, boredom and even black humor.

“Maybe it’s a robot ship,” ventured Ediphus, who had been nursed back to health only to be condemned by that cursed Velorian warlord. “Maybe they’re just going to shoot it into the sun. No loss; shittiest military ship I’ve ever seen.”

There were murmurs of bitter laughter.

“Wish we’d had a chance to gang-bang that Star Marshal,” chimed in another Prime by the name of Abukal. “Bet we could have worn out her 300-year old cunt.”

That drew whistles and applause. It didn’t matter that they had Teri’s age wrong; it was the thought that counted. And it led to a round of increasingly explicit and vile comments about what they’d like to do with the Star Marshal and Velorians in general. Abukal was the hero of the hour, always managing to top the others.

Oon’ah wasn’t spared, nor Xanthra. Nobody had any respect for those who would betray their own kind. The Imperials had their own fierce sense of honor -- no matter how brutal, no matter how vulgar their behavior. It was good for discipline, it was good for morale, even on a journey without hope. Shared martyrdom was still something shared.

They lost track of time, unable to reckon the hours or the days. Until an announcement came over the intercom.

“We are now entering the wormhole,” the voice said. “We regret any discomfort.”

It was enough to inspire jeers, even among the most jaded.

“How about our shackles!” yelled Abukal. “They’re *ugly*.”

“Their annihilation chamber too, most likely,” opined Ediphus. “Maybe they’ll apologize for that, too.”

The wormhole passage was nothing unusual; they’d all been through ones just like this, or worse.

Then the voice returned.

“We have left the Binkleyan system,” it said now. “No further communication that would jeopardize security is possible. We can now tell you that your sentences are suspended, and that you will be transported to a world called Sanctuary. You may have heard of this world, but we hope that you have not. You will not, in any case, have the opportunity to jeopardize your new home and its inhabitants by spreading any information about it or them. You will presently be instructed in what is needful to know of your destination.”

* * *

“We’ve contained the Conservatives, for now,” Naomi Kim’Vallara told her son. “And the return of Alisa is still giving the newsnets a field day – even the Scrumbles netcasts are taking a hit. But now that you’re here, they’ll be after you, too, and that can only harm our cause – even expose Terri’s ruse. It won’t be forever, but you’ve got to go now.”

“I understand,” said James, no longer a colonel, no longer anything. “Bidu’s homesick, anyway. We’d already planned to visit Novo Recife. It’s just going to be a longer visit now.”

“We’ll keep the Theel’dara Initiative alive,” said Naomi. “You can depend on that, now that Sigurd’s survived a vote of confidence. You weren’t doing the wrong thing, really, just at the wrong time and in the wrong place.”

Prime Minister Utvandrer, Naomi’s husband, had put it more strongly than that. But then he’d had to. Moreover, the fact that he could be seen as putting Principle above Family – that was why he had avoided James’ company, although he suffered his wife to “endure” it. All the better to project himself as a firm and decisive leader.

“Strange how things work out,” Alisa mused. “Suddenly, after all this time, I’m embraced and you’re disgraced. But it’s good seeing you again, even if it can’t be for long. And meeting Bidu.”

“And meeting Andre,” James added. “And Lillith a Protector? Will wonders never cease!”

Lillith, in her acolyte’s uniform, seemed to radiate pride as well as beauty. As determined to become one of Velor’s warriors as her mother had been determined not to, she nevertheless shared something fundamental with Alisa: her integrity.

“We’re still a family,” Naomi said. “Even Nikki. We occasionally get word about her. She’s still up to her old tricks; she’s probably had thousands of men by now. But she’s saving lives, too, doing good works. And I guess she’ll be hearing about you before long.”

“Oon’ah and Xanthra are the only ones on the Aurean ship to know where they were going when they got on board,” James related. “Teri was willing to allow them that much. Besides. Xanthra finally did reveal what she knew of Aurea’s genetic engineering program. They may be producing tset’lars again, besides the one they met. There were even whispers about creating tset’lars from Tanzrobian stock.”

“Stealth tset’lars?” Andre broke in. “Are you sure?”

“We’re not sure of anything,” James said. “That’s the whole point.”

* * *

The skies were strange, here on Sanctuary. But the skies were friendly.

So was the ground. That was where they had been greeted, flightless and flying alike, to be greeted by Klara McCloud, chancellor of the planet, and her family, and their friends.

They had been briefed on shipboard about the planet, about the McClouds, about how they embraced Supremis of description, from pure Aurean to pure Velorian and everything in between and outside the box, from enhanced Terrans like Ben Shaffer to enhance Diaboli like Jason Ungphakorn – now a father, like Shaffer, to a flock of hybrid offspring.

What they hadn't been briefed on was the non-stop party Klara and her hybrid daughters threw to greet the new arrivals. Terrans as well as Supremis shared food and wine – and stories – with the newcomers. Nikki Kim'Vallara, known to them by name as James' sister, lived up to her name and local fame by fucking all the male Aureans – including Ediphus Wrecks.

“She really made my day,” he said later. “Well, *night*.”



Somebody had given Xanthra a gown for the occasion, but it didn't stay on very well. After the party, Oon'ah and Xanthra flew into space, oblivious to its harm. Both still wore their native worldly gowns. The unfiltered heat of the sun quickly burned the lacquer from their hair. It floated free about their heads like little windstorms.

In full view of her lover, Xanthra raised her arms from her sides, and compelled her Supremis muscles to inflate. Instantly, her gown flew off, the abruptness of her expanding physique forcing it away from her.

Oon'ah smiled her appreciation of her lover's show, then gracefully turned to let the naked sun's heat reduce her gown to carbon on her. She closed her eyes, and thrilled as the disintegrating material released its hold on her body -- until she felt a sudden blast of intense heat on her groin.

Instinctively, Oon'ah cupped herself with both her hands as she looked about surprised. She saw Xanthra a little way off. She was her normal self once more. Her look was unreadable at first, and then the Aurean blasted her again -- with that mischievous grin that never failed to light up her entire world.

She turned away, offering her love to follow. Oon'ah did - nailing her in the butt with a pair of heat beams of her own. So off they went until neither could be seen save for the intermittent flashes from their eyes. Soon, however, even those, too, were far from view.

THE END