

# Encounter at Westfold

## Part Two

By Brantley Thompson Elkins

Based on a concept by Shadar

### Chapter Seven

“How do you feel this morning?”

Dr. Morrison had to really concentrate to make out that it was Captain Kalik. His head was swimming and he had trouble focusing his eyes. But he could tell that he was no longer in the place with the silk drapes and the platform. He was lying on a bed in a small room, like a cabin on a steamship.

“Tolerable,” he said. “What morning is it?”

“Barren 1-10, I believe, in your local parlance.”

“Three days?”

“A fast recovery. Some take a week. And of course, some don’t make it at all.”

“Thanks for reminding me of my good fortune.”

“It isn’t entirely a matter of fortune. Your experience with Kyreen made you more... receptive to the retrovirus.”

Morrison couldn't quite make sense of that, and not only because retroviruses were an unfamiliar concept here on Westfold. If it were simply a matter of tipping her velvet, couldn't Kyreen herself have accomplished the same end – assuming she could have held still for it? And if she *didn't* harbor the retrovirus, how could intimate contact with have prepared him to receive it?

He was suddenly reminded of a comical exchange in Wollof they'd had one night. She actually knew the language better than he did, given that she was a quick study – and also given that most Africans here spoke English, what with official business at the College being conducted in that tongue.

“Ganda gu ema baax te saf,” she'd said, after playing his flute. *A sizeable cock is good and tasty.*

“Coota gu ema baax te saf,” he'd responded, before he eagerly tongued her pussy. *A sizeable clit is good and tasty.*

Morrison tried to press the matter.

“Doesn't Kyreen have...?” he ventured.

Kalik shook his head.

“Only P-1 Class Velorians. That was a gift from Aphro'dite to the Protectors...”

“Long after the exile, long after the gene bomb,” Morrison filled in.

He could see better now, and think more clearly, even though he felt sluggish. He could tell that Kalik looked annoyed.

“The Velorians would dispute that,” the captain said. “But, not being Velorian-born and raised, I can't speak authoritatively on the matter. To the best of our knowledge, the Aureans have never replicated Enhancement, in Primes or even Tset'lars.”

“Then how could...?”

“It’s rather complicated. And not my specialty. My background is in physics.”

Morrison sensed that Kalik was being evasive, but he didn’t want the captain to suspect that. Westfold had heard one side of the Supremis war from Aurean records, and an entirely different one from these Velorians. Only, what if neither was telling the entire truth?

Kalik’s expression suddenly changed. Had the captain read his mind? Only, it was a wry smile that he took on now as he...

Morrison hadn’t even noticed the holster; he’d been looking up at Kalik’s face. But there was no mistaking the weapon he had drawn and was now aiming. Some sort of pistol, the like of which he had never seen before.

Reflex took over, banishing thought. Morrison reached for the gun and tried to bat it aside, but he was too clumsy. He brought his hands before his face in a futile gesture to shield himself as the captain fired.

He had expected a single shot, but there came instead a fusillade. *Like a stitching gun*, he thought, and immediately wondered how he could still be thinking *anything*. He felt the impacts, but they were only light taps against his chest. Around him there were louder sounds of metal hitting metal. Then the impacts moved lower. God, the man was shooting at his privates and it felt like – tickling?

Abruptly, the gunfire stopped. Only then did it begin to dawn on Morrison what had happened. He dropped his hands to his sides, and looked at Kalik sheepishly.

Kalik burst out laughing.

“I really had you going there, didn’t I?” the captain said after he managed to bring his laughter under control. “You’ll have to get used to being invulnerable. I did.”

He paused for a moment.

“No harm to the... family jewels, I think you call them. Nor to the cabin walls from the ricochets. Vendorian steel. And you’ll be able to father more children with Kyreen. But *only* with Kyreen; if you think about it a moment, you’ll realize what an invulnerable cock would do to any woman who isn’t a supremis. As for Alisa and Lillith, their part in this is done.”

\* \* \*

Dr. John Abramson wasn’t accustomed to receiving visitors at his private office besides fellow researchers and occasional government bureaucrats. The former usually reported progress in their projects; the latter complained of slow progress in a Project that, frankly, he didn’t think people of their rank had any business knowing about.

He was therefore surprised, and sorely annoyed, to be approached this day by Dr. Morrison’s valet Arthur Jeeves. Valets, according to long-established custom originating in England and maintained here on Westfold, were to be seen and not heard except by their masters. But Jeeves had insisted that the matter had to do with his master, and Dr. Abramson’s clerk had therefore admitted him.

“Begging your pardon, sir, but I don’t know where else to go,” he ventured. “Master David’s never been out this long without getting word to me. I thought it might be some emergency here at the College... with the Project.”

“There’s no emergency here, I can assure you,” Dr. Abramson responded evenly, suppressing his further annoyance that Jeeves even knew about the Project – such

knowledge was improper but, under the circumstances, he supposed, inevitable. “How long has he been gone?”

“Four days, sir. Since I left him at ... Miss Kiplinger’s.”

Dr. Abramson almost snorted at the formality.

“Perhaps they’ve gone on a visit to her parents,” he suggested. “We’re on a few days break and on track with the project. Nothing urgent to keep them here.”

“I called them yesterday, sir. They haven’t heard from her. That was why I decided to come to you. Of course, it may be nothing. Dr. Morrison did mention having another engagement the morning after...”

Dr. Abramson knew what was going on between David and Kyreen. It was one of those open secrets that nobody talked about.

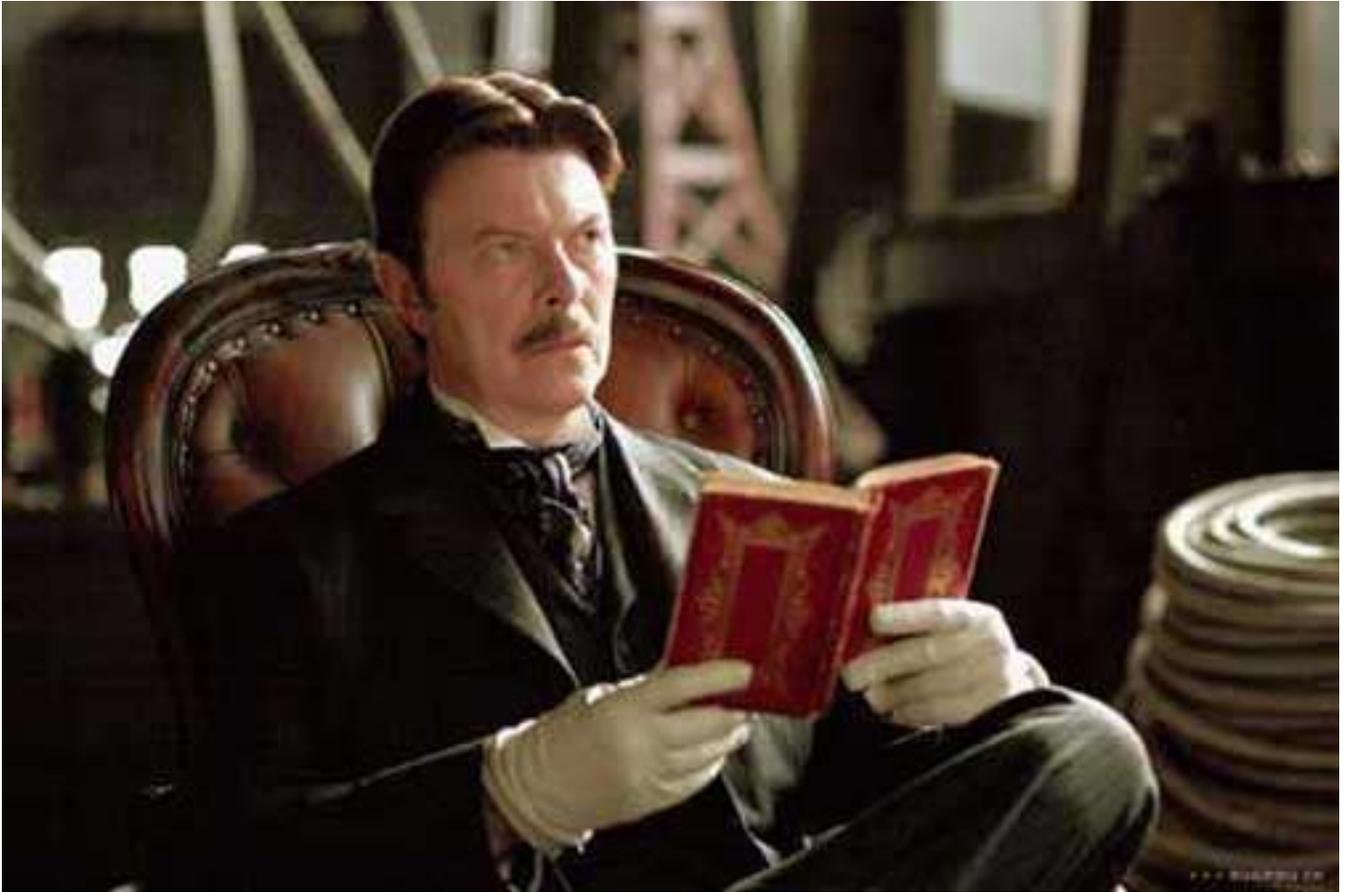
“But that was three days ago, sir.”

“Nothing to worry about, I’m sure. But thank you for your concern.”

It was an invitation for Jeeves to leave. Fortunately, he took the hint.

But Dr. Abramson decided he’d better investigate – if he could.

Only, how even to *start*, he wondered, as he sat in his office holding but not actually reading a book he had been perusing before Jeeves’ visit.



Most likely David and Kyreen were just off sparking. On the other hand, this might have something to do with the Velorians. It was that Velorian woman, after all, who had approached him, quite out of the blue, somehow knowing about the Project and seeing a flaw in it – but he had no idea where she might be found.

It occurred to him that Kyreen might have returned to the campus even if David hadn't. He'd better ring up Brigitte Keita, a disagreeable business, especially of late. But she was still part of the Promise project, and there was nothing for it but to confront her.

\* \* \*

David Morrison was impatient. It was a day and a half since he had come out of Enhancement fever. He was still trying to get his mind around the change, even after

the surprise demonstration that Andre had given him.

He had spent the night – he had been told it was night, although he had no way of telling for sure aboard the ship – with Kyreen. He had been very careful with her, hadn't even sought to penetrate her, for the sake of her unborn child.

The child! Alisa had told him before his Enhancement that it would never be born, not unless Kyreen underwent some mysterious treatment known only to the Velorians. But there hadn't been a word about that since – not to him and not, he had learned last night, to Kyreen herself.

*Something's not right here*, he thought, and the summons from Andre Kalik to meet him in his quarters to discuss a “delicate matter” hadn't put him in any better frame of mind.

The captain's quarters, like most of the other rooms on the ship, had walls that somehow glowed without any visible source of light. There were amenities recognizable as a bed and a desk and shelves. On the desk was a device with a glowing screen with a changing pattern of alien images and letters and/or numbers that he couldn't begin to understand. The shelves were filled with what looked vaguely like books but weren't.

Andre invited David to take a seat that mysteriously rose out of the floor like some instantly growing toadstool.

“We're about to take a trip,” he said.

“I don't think so,” David objected. “I have duties back at the college. And whatever you may have in mind for me as a stud, it must wait until Kyreen's present child is born. Which reminds me—“

“Of precisely the point,” the captain told him. “There is a problem with her fetus, as

you know. That is what the trip is about.”

“But Alisa told me you know how to treat the problem.”

“We haven’t been entirely frank with you, I’m afraid. “*Think* about it. We found your world quite by accident, while on a mission quite unrelated to what we face now. Ours is a survey ship, not a medical laboratory. But we *can* help Kyreen. We are reasonably certain that the problem can be dealt with. Just not here.”

“Where then?”

“Rostran. It’s on the other side of the wormhole we emerged from to reach here, but through a different vector.”

David recalled having heard the name before. Something to do with the Tset’lars. But he recalled something else more vividly.

“You told us you were lost.”

“We never said we were lost; only that we came out at an unexpected destination, perhaps even in an unexpected time. But our computers recorded our course in exact detail, and we *can* return.”

“Computers? You have crewmen who can record such things?”

“Not people. Machines. Like the small one you see on my desk. They serve some of the same functions as your difference engines, and many others besides, only in a more advanced manner and based on an entirely different principle. Your people must have found something of the sort on Kyreen’s ship.”

“Her ship’s archives. She couldn’t explain how the system worked. She transcribed everything she could to paper before they ceased to function.”

“And well she did, or your people could never have gotten as far as they have. But

she could never have anticipated what she faces now, and neither could those who sent her here. We believe that they must have had a breeding program in mind but, naturally, quite a different idea of who the father or fathers would be.”

“You still want me to be a father now? In the natural sense?”

“Of course. Later. But that wasn’t the reason for your Enhancement. We needed to prepare you for the journey, which, in view of the fluid situation here, we must make as short as we possibly can.”

David shook his head in puzzlement.

“You don’t know anything about interstellar travel, do you? Even in our time, it can be quite time-consuming. Transit through wormholes doesn’t usually take very long. It’s getting from inhabited worlds to the wormholes that’s the problem. That and getting from the wormhole exits to the final destination. The only way to cut travel time is on the climb and the descent. That takes a great deal of energy, but energy’s no problem – our engines tap a sea of energy that is space itself. It’s the *acceleration* that’s the problem.”

“I think I understand,” David said.

“Exactly. Even driving your steam cart, you must feel a bit of acceleration pressing you against the back of your seat. Very slight, of course, only a fraction of the local gravity... How much do you weigh?”

“Fifteen stone.”

Kalik looked puzzled. “Fifteen *what?*”

Now it was David’s turn to look puzzled.

“Pounds,” Kalik pressed.

“Oh,” David said after a moment. “You mean *avoirdupois*. Two hundred and ten.”

“Well, imagine weighing 21,000 pounds or... 1,500 stone.”

“I don’t think I want to imagine it.”

“You’d better, because that’s what you’ll weigh when we go to full boost. But it won’t hurt you. Not any more. As for the rest, Alisa and I had better explain it to the both of you.”

\* \* \*

Dr. Abramson hadn’t gotten anywhere with Brigitte.

“She missed her routine checkup today,” she’d said when he called. Even over the crude headset of his office telelog, Abramson could hear the acid tone of her voice. “Really, this is intolerable! Can’t you exercise any control over Dr. Morrison? How can you allow this disgusting affair to continue? I ought to complain to the Chancellor.”

“From all accounts, it was Kyreen’s idea. What do you expect me to do about *that*?”

“Look after her interests, that’s what. She’s young and naïve and she’s being taken advantage of. She’s gotten it into her head that she’s somehow obligated to him for the use of his lifecipher material in the Project.”

“Did *she* tell you that?”

“She didn’t have to. I understand these things, being a woman and an African and committed to—”

“Oh, get off your high horse. You know as well as I do that using his material was your idea. He never had a say in it, and I’m sorry I approved it. But never mind that; we’ve been over it enough before. The important thing is that both David and Kyreen are *missing*. I take it you don’t have any more idea where they might be than I do, so I’m not going to waste any more time on your nonsense. Plugging off.”

Abramson pulled the plug and threw the headset on his desk in disgust.

*At least she doesn't know about the Velorians*, he tried to comfort himself. But it was scant comfort. He couldn't consult the police, because he couldn't tell *them* about the Velorians, either. And the military... the military would probably want to launch an immediate attack on the supposed enemies of Westfold.

Abramson could hardly advise them against that. What did he *really* know about the Velorians or the Aureans... or even Kyreen?

No, best to remain silent, and hope for the best.

## Remembrance One

"You will be safe there," Doctor Lerne had told her. "More than safe. You carry with you the seeds of destiny. Even the Galen know nothing of the world that is to be your destination, and they know nothing of you. But in the fullness of time you shall know everything and may become everything, even the salvation of the Empire should all else fail."

She was only five, and could barely understand the meaning of the words, but she felt their import. She was the Chosen, the Tset'lar created from Aurean and Tanzrobian DNA in a remote research institute on a remote world of the Imperium. It was a violation of Naturalist principles, of course, but so had been the previous Tset'lars. It was all a matter of what Lerne called the Method.

Kyreen had seen pictures and vids of the man and woman who were in a sense her parents, but she had never seen them in person and they had never seen her at all. The project was too secret for them to share, and they knew nothing of their part in it, having

donated their DNA under a subterfuge. They had never heard of the results, and would never know that she alone among Tset'lars would be able to bear children like herself as a Naturalist.

“Perhaps we shall honor them on the Emperor’s birthday, after you have fulfilled your destiny,” Lerne had said. Looking back now, it seemed like some sort of a joke.

The people where she was going would believe her story, he had told her, because of what she was and because the Records had been so tailored. But the Records on the ship would not include certain crucial facts – including the time of the flowering of her capacity to recognize suitable sources of DNA compatible with her own, or the date that her people would return. It was all part of the plan.

Yet there was a flaw in the plan. Kyreen knew that those who had conceived it had lives outside the plan – lives that had nothing to do with her, but meant everything to them. She would catch snatches of conversation about friends and lovers, present or absent; of longings to return home when their work on the Project was done. They would allow her to watch vids for children, sometimes even those for adults; the people in the vids went places and did things that seemed much more exciting than what had been laid out for her.

Even so, it might not have mattered, but for the crash. The Betans who would have supervised her upbringing on Westfold, who would in later years have established the breeding program for her there, were all dead. She no longer had to answer to anyone but herself. She was a child prodigy, and more knowing than anyone would expect of a seven-year old.

What the people at the Institute hadn't told her was just how the breeding program would be implemented. She would beget more Tset'lars like herself, she knew, using the DNA of whomever she Recognized; but the process itself remained a mystery. The Betan crew of her ship had indicated that she would learn that only at the proper time; it was apparently a closely guarded secret. But the secret, whatever it was, had died with them when the ship came to grief. There had been no record of it, at least none that had survived.

Kyreen could have dug herself out of the crash but she was cautious – and even calculating. When she first set eyes on David Morrison and the other men of Westfold, she somehow sensed that she could forge a destiny of her own with them.

And when, barely into her teens, she Recognized David, she gave no outward sign. She suspected that people on Westfold would consider it inappropriate at her age, as indeed they would. But beyond that, she was turning over in her mind how she might change the plan devised by her creators, assuming she could learn on her own how to go about reproducing with a non-supremis – surprise them when they returned...

That thing the Velorians had done with David: the Aureans wouldn't anticipate that, any more than they would anticipate the scientists of Westfold reproducing the Method for creating hybrid Tset'lars. They would be sending Primes to implement the Method, and to serve her own needs...

Unless, unless...

Could that actually be *it*? Had they been *playing* her?



## Chapter Eight

“You have to understand about the genetic wars,” Alisa told Kyreen. “They lasted for centuries. It began with the Tset’lars, but we soon developed countermeasures, principally the Sara’yen, at a secret laboratory of our own. And so the arms race was on, each side trying to gain advantage, however small, in hopes it would be decisive.”

But a mysterious plague that seemed to attack only the Tset’lars and the Sara’yen had finally put an end to the genetic wars. Because it seemed astronomically unlikely to be coincidence, it Velorians and Aureans alike suspected that the long unseen Galen had engineered the plague.

“Only it didn’t quite end,” Alisa continued. “The Empire relocated its laboratories to remote worlds, and pursued a new strategy of combining elements of the Aurean Prime genome with those of protos – genetically enhanced humans created by the Galen on other worlds millennia earlier – to create a new breed of Tset’lar immune to the plague.”

She focused now on Kyreen.

“You are one of the results of that program.”

“So now you’re telling me that I’m a monster,” she protested.

“That’s what you and Andre said about all Tset’lars,” David added.

“Andre knows better. So do I. It was their kin on Rostran who enhanced him, and later saved his life.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a long story,” Alisa said. “Too long to get into now.”

“*Very* long,” Andre agreed. “But better known to her than to me.”

“You haven’t been very straight with us, have you?” David asked.

“We thought it best to dissimulate a bit,” Andre explained. “We weren’t sure *your* treatment was going to work. But things are different now. Very different.”

David turned to Kyreen. She seemed to look anxious.

“It’s all right,” he assured her. “Everything’s going to be all right now.”

She didn’t look as if she believed it.

“Is something the matter?” he pressed her.

“How long will we be gone?” she asked.

“We’ll be missed,” David pointed out. “We should—”

“It will be a few weeks there and back,” Andre assured them. “What could happen in so short a time?”

“Still, we should leave some sort of word. Something plausible.”

“We can have Trina see to it,” Andre said after a moment, with what David took to be a tone of annoyance in his voice. “I’ll go over the wording with you.”

Kyreen appeared to be relieved that it would be a few weeks rather than a few months, David had noticed. But, after all, she must be concerned about her baby. But, after all, she must be concerned about her baby.

\* \* \*

John and Hilary Kiplinger lived in the country, far from the capital of Stanton or the university town of New Oxford. Their farmhouse was at the end of a long lane off the coastal high road, and hidden from sight behind a copse of trees.

That, and the fact they could have no children of their own, had been factors in the Commonwealth’s decision to place Kyreen with them fifteen years ago. Raising an alien child, they knew, would be a difficult task, but the Commonwealth had made it worth

their while – so worth their while that they didn't really have to work the farm any more, although they still did a bit of gardening.

They'd had a bit of help at first: a burly sergeant named Rutledge, who had been assigned by the government to "acclimatize" the child. That meant teaching her to know her own strength and to keep it under control. Not to break things and, especially, not to break people. Kyreen could have easily broken him, of course, but she seemed to have gotten the idea to respect a man in uniform.

Kyreen seemed eager to please, and there had been few accidents – at least, the sort of accidents that had originally been feared.

What the Kiplingers hadn't counted on was her ability to see through walls. That was how she found out about sex one night. John and Hilary wouldn't have known if she hadn't come in and asked what was the matter, taking their screams and moans as signs of distress.

"No Kyreen, we weren't fighting," Hilary told her.

John said nothing, but gave her a reassuring look as he pulled the covers up.

Hilary explained as best she could that it was something grownups did to have fun and to make babies. Only she couldn't have babies herself.

"My womb is barren, and John's seed can find no purchase," she said.

John looked embarrassed.

"When I grow up, can I have fun that way and make babies?" Kyreen asked.

"I hope so," was all Hilary could say.

Years later, Kyreen told them about her flings with other girls. They tried to hide their disapproval; they frowned on homosexuality, like most Westfoldans of their class.

But when she told them about David, they couldn't hide their joy, and they could tell from the look on her face that she was well bedded if not well wedded.

John and Hilary had seen Kyreen only intermittently, usually on weekends, since she had entered College. They had followed the news, and were familiar with the public part of her life. Of her private life, they knew only of her affair with David.

It was a cause for worry then, when David's valet had called them, looking for her. If she wasn't with them, and she wasn't at the College, where could she be?

"It must have something to do with the military," John said. "They're always after her for one thing or another."

"I don't understand what more they could want of her," Hilary said. "After all those silly tests. Shooting at her and the like."

"Maybe they've developed something bigger. But if it doesn't work on her, it won't work against the invaders."

"Damned stupid idea, I say."

"Only, what... what if it *did* work?"

Silence hung in the air between them for several moments. They usually avoided talk about Kyreen possibly coming to harm.

"They ought to find some other way to test these things," John finally said.

A briefer silence.

"Well, we ought to get to pickling the rest of those beets," Hilary said.

\* \* \*



No gold. *No gold!*

It was as if she were naked for the first time.

They were back in the room with the red gauze drapes. But this time they were all by themselves. Kyreen was riding him with wild abandon, fearing nothing but feeling everything as she took him in, as she gripped him deliciously with her inner muscles.

Her face was filled with passion, the more so when he reached up to caress her rich brown flesh, to toy with her provoking breasts, to tweak her nipples. She'd clamp on him harder then, and he could feel a warm glow, hard and hot enough melt steel – he couldn't help remembering that vid. But now he could take all the loving she could give, just as she could take all the loving he could give.

David pulled her down for a deep kiss now, his arms holding her tight. As they deepened their kiss, he came and then she came, with a shudder they imagined could be felt through the whole ship.

"I love you," he said, for the first time.

“I love you,” she said, for the first time.

They’d been afraid to say it before. But now there was nothing to fear.

*Rostran.* It was only a name to David and Kyreen, who had known no other worlds except by name. It had surprised him that his true love, for so he thought of her now, did not even know where she had been born. Created, rather.

Just as on Velor. So the Velorians had admitted. The Maternity engine. How could it be? How could anyone accept it? The Aureans hadn’t; that was part of their history – the part for which, no matter what else he might believe about them, David still maintained a sympathy.

But then, what had the Promise project *here* been doing? A project that had, the Velorians said, gone so wrong that it would take the advanced technology of Rostran to save the baby he had (however unwittingly) helped bring into being.

*Rostran.* Another experiment in what they called “genetic engineering,” it seemed. Something to do with kella-primers, whatever those might be. Alisa had tried to explain the whole history of Aurean biotechnology, going back to some planet called Igoybe that had allied itself with the Empire and lent its expertise to the creation of the first Tset’lars. It was more than David could take in, or even wanted to.

And yet Andre and Alisa had natural-born children, and wanted him and Kyreen to do the same.

Was there still some hidden agenda here? How was he to know?

## Remembrance Two

It was just after the second Kim'Vallara family reunion on Velor that Alisa proposed an expedition.

It was a bad time for the family, even with Lillith's graduation from the Academy and investment as a Protector. Alisa's brother James had gotten into trouble for exceeding his authority in the Binkley's World integration campaign. He had escaped court martial only by agreeing to return to Novo Recife, his previous assignment, with his native wife Bidu.

"It's only until things blow over," Alisa told Andre the morning after the colonel's abrupt and unexplained departure. "That's what mother says. But her hands are tied; even the Prime Minister's hands are tied. They don't dare appear to be playing favorites with the family; the Conservatives are up in arms because James hid a relationship between an auxiliary Protector and a Prime – he *knew* she was a Prime and let it go. Our amnesty was supposed to be only for Betans. She really had come over, but didn't have any way of knowing that."

There hadn't been a hint of this from Sigurd or Naomi Utvandrer the day before at the ceremony. Naomi's stay-at-home daughter Sara had even been covering it for the newsnets. Even now, Alisa said, nobody was pointing fingers at her as part of the same family as the disgraced colonel. But there were those, she knew, who remembered her own disgrace – even though she had been officially forgiven.

"We should be keeping a low profile right now," she said. "Out of sight, out of mind."

Then she dropped her bombshell.

"But why go back *there* now?" Andre protested. "Why go back at all?"

“Unfinished business,” Alisa said. “The other vectors at Cygnias 275.”

“The Octopus Wormhole. The Lost City.”

“We won’t be going there. I promise. But the other vectors. We never tried any of them. It’s important to take both subjective and objective readings of transit times. That was the whole point of our original research. Maybe we’ll find some new correlations that haven’t been manifest at... ordinary wormholes.

*The Durgin expedition.*

That was why Andre looked older than Alisa, although they were about the same age. She bore the burden of remembering that story better than he did. He would never remember most of it, she knew. It was for the best.

“I don’t think the Service would approve of this,” Andre said.

“They gave us the ship. No strings attached, they said. But we owe them, just the same. If we can’t find out what happened to the Old Galactics, we might at least find out why Cygnias 275 is so important, why it’s like no other wormhole. That might be a greater discovery than Rostran, and we can’t even talk about Rostran.”

“There are risks.”

“We can minimize them. We can operate the ship ourselves, just family. No need to jeopardize Terrans.”

“I think Lillith will be otherwise engaged,” Andre pointed out.

“One word from me and Naomi will see to it that she’s placed on detached service. She’ll be with us. And Trina.”

“Ari?”

“Sigurd and Naomi can take care of him while we’re gone.”

Lillith had dreamed of being a Protector from childhood, and when she came of age she was welcomed to Velor to take the rites – even though she was the daughter of a one-time fugitive, and natural born at that. The entire family had been invited to attend the rites. Naomi, Alisa’s mother, was by then the wife of the Velorian prime minister and the first woman to serve in the Senate.

After the first family reunion, Andre and Alisa had returned to Kelsor 7, where Trina was born. Three more years, and they once again voyaged to Velor, this time in their new ship, for Lillith’s graduation. But now Alisa was restless.

“I want to do field work again,” she said at the ceremony. Andre had only nodded – until she filled in the details.

Their ship was called *Andre’s Flame*. It was a private joke. But it was a ship like no other, capable of accelerating at 100 Gs or more but larger and better equipped than the Velorian courier ships used for urgent diplomatic missions.

“At least we won’t be stuck out there for years,” Andre said. “With any luck, we can bring something back home besides family vids. With the boost we’ve got...”

“Heavy,” Alisa kidded him. One of those old Terran expressions she’d picked up – but appropriate for a vessel that could accelerate at 100 Gs or more.

## Chapter Nine

They could see Westfold dwindle behind them on the screen. The entire continent on which they had lived was now a green and brown patch on a blue sphere. Smaller patches were the Outer Islands.

No one had seen the *Andre's Flame* take off, the captain had told them, any more than they had seen it land. It was something the Velorians called "cloaking," which to David's mind conjured up an old fairy tale about a wizard and his invisibility cloak. The wizard hadn't come to a good end, he seemed to recall.

The sky about them was black. David had never seen that, any more than he had seen his world as a sphere. Alisa was talking about the Old Galactics, the ones who had built the wormholes, including the one they were headed for. Only, the one they were headed for was apparently unlike any other.

"I don't remember it," Kyreen said. "I don't even know whether it was this wormhole. The navigational records were all destroyed in the crash."

"But it *must* have been," Alisa insisted. She seemed to have a stake in that.

Andre stayed out of the conversation. But he had the helm, after all. Still, he had seemed a bit distant since the takeoff, as if something was on his mind. And neither he nor Alisa, moreover, had been any more specific about what would happen when they got to Rostran.

It would take only a few days to reach Cygnias 275. That much they allowed.

\* \* \*



Daniela Moyo was beautiful. Not only that, she was cheerful – something rare in bureaucrats. She even whistled while she worked.

She had a degree in economics, after all, and another in governance. She might become Finance Minister herself one day. Or go into business.

She was presently going over accounts of government grants to the College of Natural Philosophy. Routine stuff, except for a program in the biology department that a budgetary account number related to Promise, and which appeared to be taking up an inordinate amount of funding – tens of thousands of pounds.

She'd have to look into that.

She did.

Only to be stonewalled by a certain Dr. John Abramson.

When she took it up with Finance Minister William Stead, he too stonewalled her. But he inadvertently overspoke himself.

"It's a military matter," Stead told her. "Not your concern, nor mine. Stay out of it."

It must have something to do with Kyreen Kiplinger; she was enrolled there, after all. But why would the Ministry of War be funding a weapons research project at the biology department at the College? That would be quite irregular, even illegitimate.

Perhaps she could reach Kyreen herself. She knew that the Defender of Westfold maintained a very private life, protected from the press. But this was an official enquiry, after all. Moreover, she had been annoyed by the Finance Minister's tone of voice.

Even at that, she might have let the matter drop if she hadn't received an annoying call from Dr. Brigitte Keita, one of Abramson's colleagues.

"Am I speaking to Daniela Moya?" the woman asked crossly. It took a while for Daniela to get her name out of her, and the conversation went downhill from there.

"It's that nasty affair between Kyreen and Dr. Morrison. That's what you ought to be investigating," Brigitte said.

"That's not my department," Daniela said, trying to put her off. "I don't know whose department it *would* be."

"How can you take the side of that tubaab?" Brigitte complained. "Don't you have any pride as an African, or as a woman?"

Daniela had pride in both – enough to call white people Brits instead of tubaabs. And this woman was even more irritating than Stead. She tried to find a polite way to end the call, but before she could think of one Brigitte was at it again.

“He’s been off with her Yaala knows where for five days. *Five days!* How Abramson can tolerate this, I can’t imagine. But then he’s a tubaab; he probably put them up to it. I ought to take this to the Constabulary, or better yet the press. They’d listen to me, which saas like you never will. In fact–”

Daniela didn’t wait to hear any more before unplugging. Being called an idiot was enough.

The next morning, there were headlines in the African press: “Fuy Kyreen?” But the Brit press soon followed with “Where is Kyreen?” And, despite pressure from Prime Minister Ramsey, both revealed everything Brigitte had to say about Promise.

\* \* \*

Minister of War Sekou Tourimi knew all about Promise, of course. He knew about Abramson and Keita and Morrison, although he had met only Morrison – and that years earlier in connection with the failure of the concentrated light cannon.

Morrison had offered the best advice he could, but with the necessary modifications the weapon had proven too cumbersome to be of any practical use. It was hard to aim, and almost impossible to move into position, given the state of Westfold’s road system and the bearing capacity of its steam-powered vehicles.

“We should have invested in transportation as well as weapons technology,” he had told Prime Minister Ramsey.

“We have only so many pounds to spend,” Ramsey had said. “We’re stretching our resources thin as it is. In any case, we can’t count on the Velorian enemy putting down conveniently next to one of our high roads. We need weapons that can be deployed wherever they’re needed, be it around the capital or in open country.”

The problem at his end wasn’t simply the design of the weapons, but the *materials*. Kyreen’s notes from the crashed Aurean ship had referred to structural use of materials that translated as “pottery” and “carbon tubes.” None of that had made any sense, to Tourimi or his advisors to the Ministry. There was also a special steel alloy, but that had been developed on a distant planet and called for something called xintanite – nobody had any idea what that might be.

Now that damned fool Keita had exposed the most secret aspect of Promise and touched off a global panic. Everybody knew that Kyreen was missing, and Morrison along with her. Keita had assumed that they had simply gone off somewhere to carry on their affair, but that didn’t make sense. Surely they must be aware of the uproar about their relationship – and Kyreen’s pregnancy. Surely they should have surfaced by now.

Justice had the Runners looking for them, but so far there wasn’t a trace of them. Morrison had been at some sports club called Mickey’s the day before he disappeared; his valet Jeeves had testified to that. Witnesses at the club, shown his picture, recalled that he had been talking with a couple of strange women. Nobody knew who they were or where they could be found.

Tourimi’s thoughts were interrupted by the jangling of the telelog. He donned his headset and plugged in.

“Your honor,” came the voice at the other end. “This is Chief Inspector Fielding of the Commonwealth Constabulary. As authorized by the Ministry, we have conducted a search of the office of Dr. David Morrison and found some disturbing evidence.”

“What sort of evidence?” Tourimi asked.

“Nothing I want to discuss over an open line,” Fielding said. “I’ll be there in a couple of hours.”

Two hours later – good time for a Constabulary steamer; he must have really been pushing it – the chief inspector was in his office.

“Here’s what we’ve found,” Fielding told him. “It was in one of his desk drawers.”

Tourimi read the note:

*Kyreen is playing into their hands.*

*Meet me at Mickey's.*

*Tonight. 8 pm.*

*Alisa.*

“Who else has seen this?” he asked.

“No one but the municipal inspector who found it. He saw immediately that it had serious implications, and filed it in his pocket before calling me. He insisted that I come in person to take charge of it, and has sworn himself to secrecy.”

“Who is this Alisa?”

“I have no idea, your honor. But it seems safe to surmise that she was one of the women seen with Morrison and the club. What’s really disturbing is this business about Kyreen ‘playing into their hands.’ And the fact that both the strange women at the club were described as blue-eyed and blonde.”

“They’re here, aren’t they?” Tourimi said, with all the calm he could muster. “The Velorians. The Enemy.”

It was a leap of faith, and would become a leap into paranoia. And yet it all seemed to come so naturally...

\* \* \*

There was an unwelcome visitor a few days later to the country home of Kyreen’s adoptive parents.

“I would strongly advise you not to come to the capital, and certainly not to New Oxford,” Deputy Masterson told them. “I can assure you that you will learn nothing about your daughter that you don’t already know. You may even face a charge of interfering with our enquiry.”

John and Hilary Kiplinger didn’t like Fielding’s threatening tone, and especially the way he was brandishing his weapon right in front of them, in their own home. What had things come to in the Commonwealth when officers of the Constabulary could act in such a manner? But there was no way to challenge this petty commander, for now.

“You will keep us informed?” John ventured.

“Insofar as that does not threaten the security of the Commonwealth,” Masterson assured them. “But please take my advice seriously. You and your steamcart will be on a watch list.”



John was fuming as the deputy turned to leave, but Hilary restrained him.

“We must indeed find out about Kyreen,” she said afterwards. “But it’s useless to incur the wrath of the authorities.”

\* \* \*

David and Kyreen watched from the bridge of the *Andre’s Flame* as *Cygnias 275* filled the viewscreen, huge and red and ominous. Another screen showed a schematic of the wormhole, as Captain Kalik monitored their course.

“Like threading a needle,” he told them. On the schematic, they could see a red dot that represented the ship dead center in a ring of green beacons that marked the path it must now take. “It’s going to be a rough ride, but Lillith and Alisa will bring us through. More easily than last time, when it was all a surprise to them.”

“It’s still a surprise to us,” David remarked. “I suppose we’ll be in for more surprises on the other side.”

He held Kyreen’s hand tightly as the countdown to transit began.

## Chapter Ten

“Wonder Child Scheme!” screamed the headline in *National Statesman*. “Abramson Summoned in Official Enquiry” was how the *New Oxfordian* reported it more soberly. As for the *Gaa Baat*, it simply wondered: “Xare?” The African press was the first to mention the possibility of war, but it had been on everyone’s minds, and the Brit press took it up the next day – more explicitly: “War with Velor?” asked the *Statesman*.

Prime Minister Ramsey had tried to contain the growing panic with carefully worded statements to the press, but that wasn’t enough. On the seventh day after the reports of

Kyreen's disappearance, he announced that he would be making an important address that evening, and that anyone would be able to hear him by special telelog link.

It wasn't that easy. The telelog network had never previously been used before for such a purpose, and most of the connections were faulty or soon broken. Yet several hundred thousand people did get through, and kept their headsets glued to their ears as their leader spoke.

"Citizens of Westfold. Citizens of all colors and all stations. Tonight we face a grave crisis, and yet we face it united. The threat of war may be remote, and yet it is real. We must be prepared for it. I am ordering full mobilization of our military forces, and appeal to everyone capable of bearing arms to report to the nearest military camp to volunteer for the militia.

"While the fate of our beloved Kyreen remains unknown, we have reason to believe that it is the work of the Velorians. No one else could possibly have either the motive or the means to harm her or abduct her. While it is possible that her elimination is the only end they have in mind, we must be prepared for the possibility that loss of her protection is only a means to an even more diabolical end."

\* \* \*

"It's all a bluff," Brigitte told Abramson the next day. "You know it as well as I do."

"And I know well enough not to say any such thing where it might be overheard," he told her. "You were a fool to go public about Promise, and you'll be a bigger fool to go with this."

"But Ramsey is playing on false hopes," Brigitte protested. "Just like a tubaab."

*“I’m a tubaab. But this isn’t a color matter; do you really suppose that Tourimi isn’t in on this? There’s nothing we can do that won’t make things worse, and land us in jail in the bargain.”*

Abramson hadn’t wanted to meet her at all, and when she insisted, he suggested an out-of-the-way coffee room at a slow time of day. He spoke in a low voice just the same, and importuned her to do the same.

*“We must speak truth to power,” Brigitte said.*

*“The only truth that matters is that these Velorians have the power. Without Kyreen, we are helpless against them. Even with her, we might be helpless. I testified as much in camera to the Enquiry, and was enjoined not to speak of it elsewhere.”*

*“But here we are speaking about it.”*

*“And here it ends. You should be grateful that I said nothing about your role in this affair at the Enquiry. Since David is missing, and has presumably left the planet with Kyreen and the Velorian Alisa, he might as well bear the entire onus for Promise. It was quite clever of you pin everything on him when you went to the press, but you are not being clever now. I’m giving your fair warning.”*

*“Are you threatening me?”*

*“I’m not the threat you have to worry about.”*

The day after that, Abramson read that Brigitte Keita had been killed in a steamcar accident. The Constabulary had absolved the driver, whose name did not appear in the account, of any responsibility.

\* \* \*

“The militia stopped me twice whilst I was taking the beets to market,” Hilary said. “And the constables gave me dirty looks when I got there. You’d think I was a person of suspicion.”

“You are,” John said. “And me likewise. Maybe they think we had something to do with whatever happened to Kyreen. Or even we’ve got her hid out someplace. It’d take a load off their minds if she turned up. Scotch all this war talk.”

“They’re keeping an eye on us. Just in case.”

“At least they’re keeping the press away. A word to the wise...”

“But Kyreen... Is there any chance....?”

“Couldn’t be. If she’s anywhere on the planet, she’d of come forward by now. Not like her to hide out and put everybody in a tizzy.”

“So you believe all this about Velorian agents taking her away?”

“What else are we to believe? And the government seem to believe it. They’ve even put out a kino called “Watch the Skies.” All about how blokes like me are needed to spot enemy space warships, and report them to the military.”

“Shouldn’t that be up to the astronomers?”

“They say we can look back and forth faster than any telescope. But when it comes to it, by the time I could report anything, the Velorians would have already landed.”

“I don’t know as we can trust the government.”

“Too right.”

\* \* \*

As the days passed, and there was nothing in the papers that made any sense to the Kiplingers, they became increasingly concerned.

On a trip to town to get the steamcart serviced, the mechanic told John he had to report the visit to the military and the constabulary. It was a general directive, he said, nothing to do with John or Hilary. John only half believed him.

Whiting was closing in; the first snow had just fallen. John had shoveled the path to the outhouse that morning before heading off to see the mechanic. They had enough set by for the winter, plus what they'd traded for in town. They'd get by. But would their planet get by? There was nothing new from Stanton, nothing in the papers but rallying cries. After all the scare stories, nothing was *happening*. Nobody really seemed to know any more than they had months ago.

## Chapter Eleven

"Chancellor Klara is presently engaged on Sanctuary," spaceport Traffic Control on Rostran had told them. At least, that was what Andre had told David and Kyreen. They were coming in for a landing anyway because, as Alisa had explained, it was here that Kyreen could get the help she needed.

There hadn't been any harm to the fetus, from either the violent acceleration to the wormhole or the equally violent deceleration from it, Alisa had assured them. But David had felt rather lethargic under the heavy G forces, and was glad to get back to normal when they took orbit at Rostran. Andre had let him and Kyreen join them on the bridge to see what they could see.

David had never seen another planet, and from space it didn't look any different from Westfold except for the outlines of the continents and seas. Andre was talking with

somebody down there in a language he couldn't understand, but he could guess that it had something to do with landing procedures.

He looked at Kyreen.

"It's new to me, too," she said. "All I remember from before they brought me to Westfold was the laboratory complex. I don't know what world it was on. I never got to see it."

Andre did something with the controls. The world below them began to grow before his eyes in the viewscreen. They must be passing over an ocean, to judge from the blue-green tone of the expanse beneath them. Their apparent speed increased as they approached what appeared to be a forested continent, and indeed turned out to be; but then the spacecraft slowed as it came in for a landing outside a city of crystal towers.

From the air, David couldn't gauge the size of the capital; there was nothing in his experience to give him any sense of scale. From the ground, after the spacecraft had come to rest, it was a different matter. The sight of the capital was so overwhelming that he couldn't take it in. It reminded him of fanciful descriptions of the Heavenly Kingdom of the Christians, and he half expected to see the Throne of God looming over it.

He could make out flying machines darting to and fro between the soaring towers in the distance; it wasn't the machines themselves that amazed him so much as...

"How—" he began.

"The traffic control system here may be the most sophisticated in the galaxy," Alisa said, anticipating his question. "But it's based on universal natural principles. A sort of kinetic homeostasis; the entire city is like a living body, its parts – including the flitters –

sensing their relationships and interactions. You don't see birds crashing into each other on Westfold, do you?"

There were people here to greet them. All dark-haired, nothing like Alisa. Aureans, most of them, he'd been forewarned, but *not* Imperials. Their ancestors had in fact been fugitives from the Empire.

One of the flitters awaited them, and they quickly boarded. Andre pushed a series of buttons, which he explained were a code for the safest and most efficient route to the Chancellor's Palace, consistent with the overall traffic flow, and they were off.

David found it quite dizzying, and even disconcerting. Time and again, it seemed as if they might collide with another flitter, despite Alisa's assurances. Although he knew on one level that his Enhancement meant that he wouldn't be harmed from a collision, his gut feelings were still those of an ordinary Westfoldan. Kyreen seemed to be taking it in stride, but then she'd been invulnerable since birth.

Of a sudden, they were climbing steeply, leaving the other traffic behind, and the government complex loomed ahead of them. It was more than David could take in, the size of a small mountain with all sorts of towers and spires and bridges between them – they looked tiny at a distance, but he knew they must be as wide as the surface streets far below. And on the highest landing of the tallest building, the flitter came to rest.

The building was two city blocks square and hundreds of stories tall, but with most of the interior given over to an immense atrium with hanging gardens and, at the very bottom, a reflecting pool. The interior and exterior walls alike were faced with white marble and polished metal trim that gleamed like silver.

They entered a lift that seemed to be made all of glass, and that moved without any cables. There were symbols David couldn't read on the controls, but apparently Alisa didn't have any trouble with them; she simply punched a button, and the lift whooshed downwards, coming to rest... David couldn't count the stories, but surely it had been at least two or three times as many as in the tallest building on Westfold.

When they got off, there was a circular hallway with a number of doors on the outside curve.

"All government offices," Alisa explained. "This used to be the Queen's palace, but she's just a constitutional monarch now that they have a democracy here, with the Chancellor as sort of—"

"Goddess," Andre interrupted.

"Trusted Advisor," Alisa continued. "She divides her time between Rostran and Sanctuary. She might want to visit Westfold one of these days."

"I should think two worlds would be enough for her," David said.

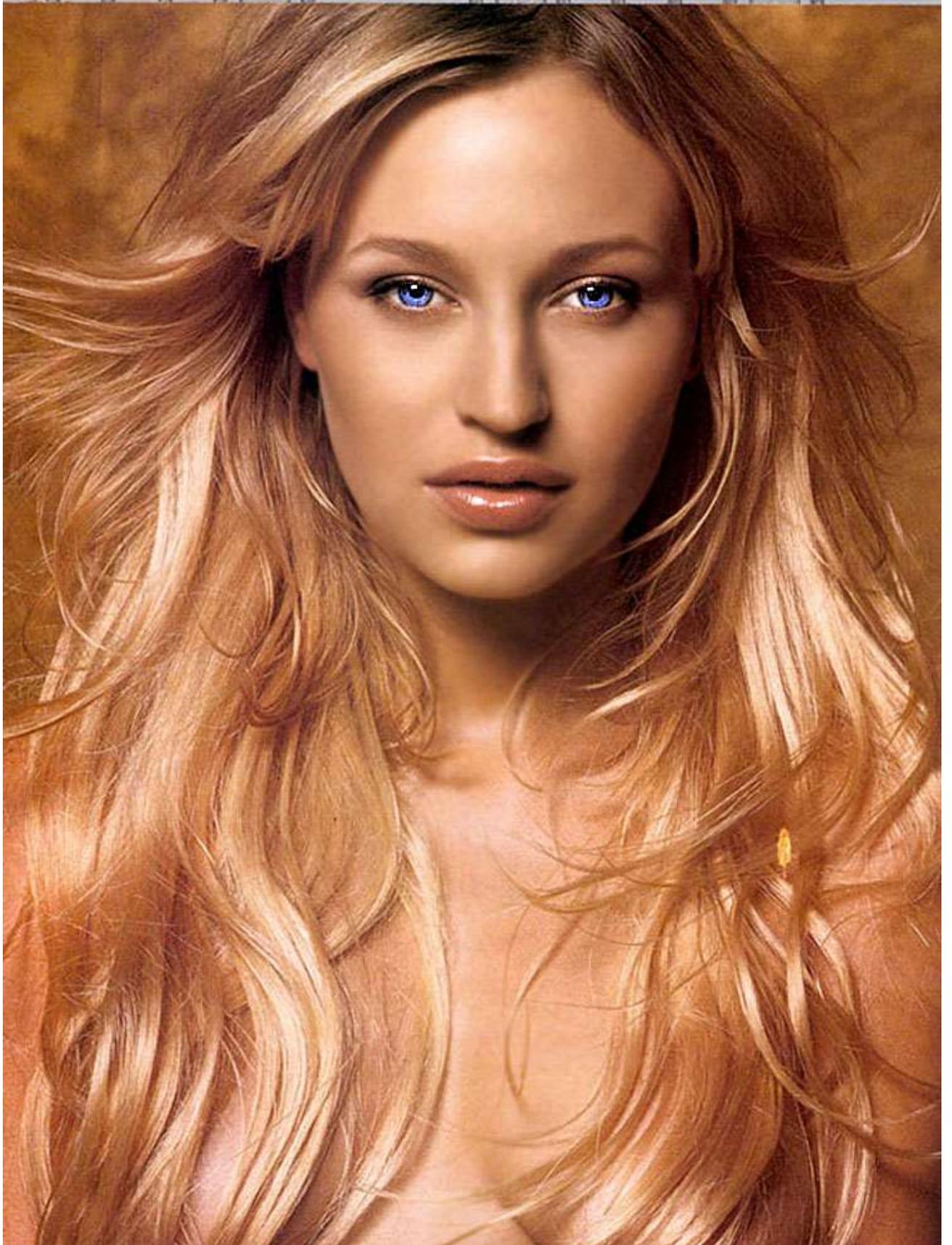
"I said 'visit.'"

\* \* \*

They were greeted by woman who appeared to be Velorian and was dressed, if one could call it that, only in her hair. She seemed to recognize the Kaliks.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," she said. "But I think it must be an unexpected situation that brings you here."

"Quite unexpected, Lara," Alisa said. "We have a great deal to discuss, and little time to do it. Do you know when Klara will be returning?"



“She’d planned on spending several months on Sanctuary, working on assimilation of the latest crop of immigrants there. But I’ve dispatched a Messenger, and once she gets word, she can make it back in a few days.”

Alisa glanced at David and Kyreen. “Lara is currently acting as Klara’s deputy,” she said, as if that explained anything.

“Lara and Klara? Are they related?” David asked.

Before Alisa could answer that, Lara took it on herself.

“I’m a freak,” she said. “Klara’s a freak too. Other than that, we have nothing in common, and we are *not* related. But after all, Rostran is a planet of freaks. Genetic freaks, that is. In a manner of speaking, we’re all part of a family. Or maybe a family quarrel.”

Alisa intervened to put her own spin on the matter. “Actually, the genetic class conflict here has been resolved. Relatively speaking.”

“Very relatively,” Andre added.

“The point is, Rostran is a genetic laboratory like no other. That’s why Kyreen needed to come here.”

“Are you the one who’ll save my baby?” Kyreen asked.

Lara let out with a small laugh.

“No, but I can introduce you to those who can. At the Rivera.”

“You mean Riviera?” David asked. “Like our southern sea coast?”

“No, *Rivera*. It used to be the headquarters of the Gwyndylyn, when they were fighting with the Church over control of Rostran, but now it’s a genetic research institution.”

They had to take another for the journey to the Rivera, which lay far off across forests and mountains and canyons. There was little sign of habitation along the way, with Lara explaining that the world's population was relatively small despite a high birth rate and enhancements that had been extending the lives of even the Terran-born inhabitants.

"People from Earth are here?" David asked, with some amazement.

"Oh, we call anybody of ordinary human stock 'Terran,'" Lara explained.

"This looks like some medieval castle," David said, as they came in for a landing at the Rivera. "Nothing like those crystal towers in the city."

"Rostran is nothing if not eclectic, in architecture or anything else," Lara said. "But the Rivera was built for show. Perhaps it takes someone from a world like yours to best appreciate it."

"I've always thought it was ugly," said Andre, gazing up at the tower that loomed over the rest of the rough stone structure. "Up there is where the Gwyndylyn Salon's Highest lived. And in the rest of the place — that's where they kept the Brooders."

"Brooders?" David asked.

"An ugly part of our history. Ordinaries, as we called them then, enhanced just enough to carry Gwyndylyn – Prime – embryos to term. They didn't always survive, the Brooders that is. But in atonement for the crimes of the past, the Institute has worked on improved technology for implantation of Supremis embryos, among other things."

"You mean..." David began.

"Exactly. Dr. Rafish will explain the details. Nevil!"

A tall and distinguished-looking African man stepped out of the front entrance of the Rivera.

## Chapter Twelve

“You’re taking an awful lot on yourself, Alisa,” Klara said.

“I seem to recall you once did the same.”

“Not to the same degree as Aayla.”

“Is she still on ice?”

“Last we checked.”

“Let me get to the point. We need some primes. Equipped with lufts.”

“I thought this was about Kyreen’s baby.”

“It is. But not *just* that. We had reason to bring her here, but we had reason to bring David as well. It was necessary for both of them to see Rostran first hand. When they return home, they’ll be able to tell Westfold that help is on the way to defend their world against the Velorian invasion.”

“But there *isn’t* any Velorian invasion... Is there?”

“Velor doesn’t even *know* about Westfold. But the Aureans do. The whole planet is a setup. The people who brought Kyreen knew that, but they’re dead. All Westfold has to go on are records from the ship and her childhood memories. Out of that, they have constructed an entire mythology. Out of fear of it, they have pursued a costly arms program – too primitive to do them any good. And by perseverance and dumb luck, they have managed to get Kyreen pregnant – as if their planet’s salvation lies in the birth of a single superchild.”

“These people are Christians, I suppose?”

“Post-Christians, most of them. But the Kyreen story obviously has parallels with the Christ story. Apart from the fact that Kyreen isn’t a virgin.”

“And yet there was a scientific equivalent of divine intervention.”

“What we need now is the military equivalent of divine intervention. We’ll have to join the battle in space, and win it there. After it’s all over, our primes can show themselves as Westfold’s saviors, Aurean warriors, and invite Westfold to ally itself with Rostran and Sanctuary.”

“Religions don’t usually carry well from planet to planet,” Klara said. “But your idea of a Third Force could get some traction.”

“The thing about Westfold is that it can become another element in that Third Force, outside the influence of the Empire or the Enlightenment. I’d hoped from the beginning that Rostran could become a hybrid of the best in Velor and Kelsor.”

“Which was before you knew me.”

“Which was before I knew about Sanctuary and what it had achieved. But Rostran was able to learn from your experience, and create a world where Aureans, Velorians and Terrans could live side by side. If only we can replicate that on Westfold, we will have justified our existence. But it has to start with Kyreen and the legend of Kyreen.”

“What am I getting myself into?”

“You’re getting yourself into protecting Rostran as well as Westfold,” Alisa said. “It’s only chance that the Aureans followed Vector 5 rather than Vector 1. Sooner or later, they’ll explore all the vectors of the Eightfold Path. Unless we stop them now and stop them cold.”

“And you want our help.”

“The Empire’s been hit hard by the loss of Binkley’s World and the rebellion on Antimony. If their mission to Westfold goes missing, they’ll probably cut their losses and give up their plans there. But they’d never give up on your planets, if they learned about them.”

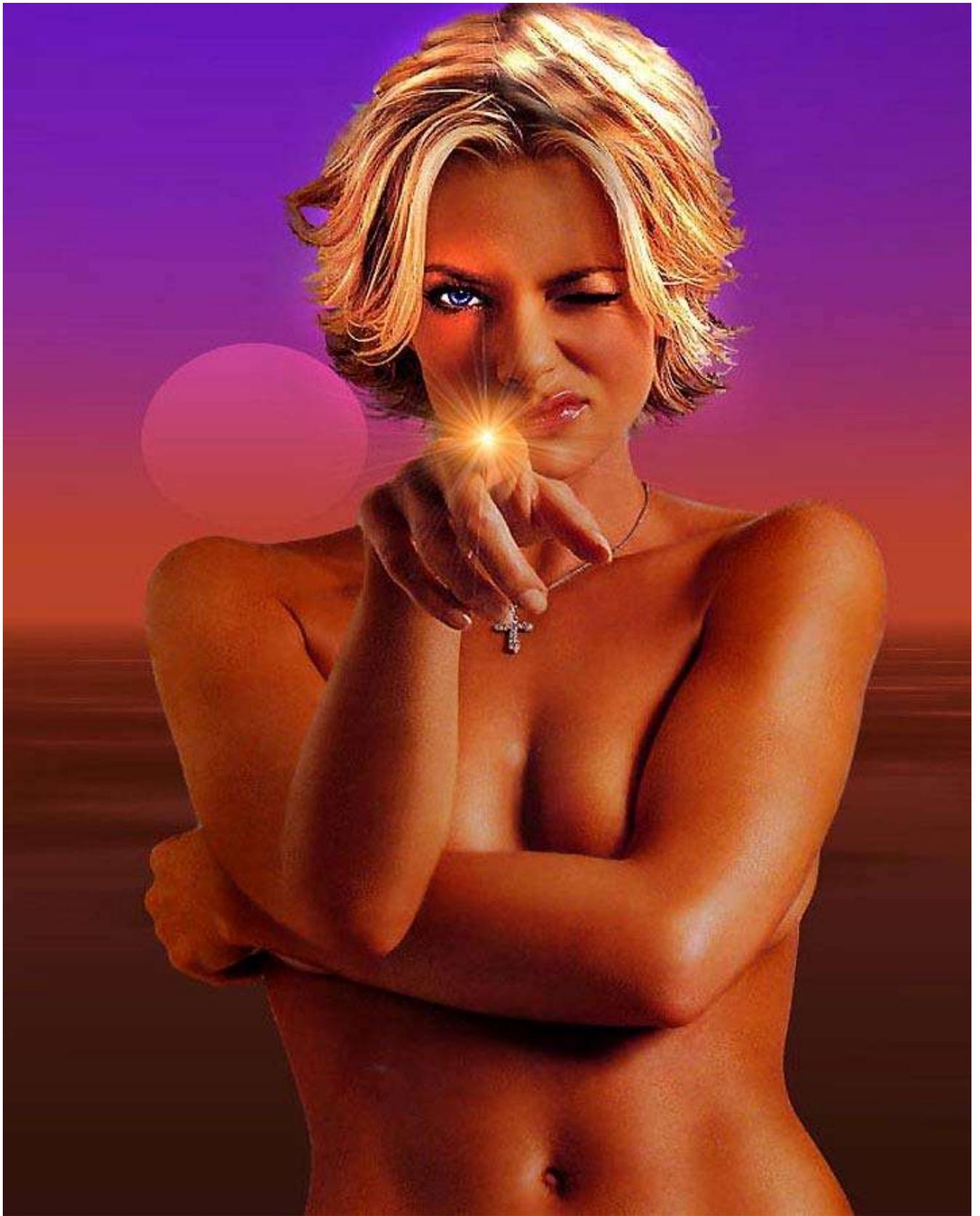
It was near sunset, and she and Klara had flown out together to a remote beach to talk things out. She hadn’t really seen that much of Rostran on her previous visits, and those visits still held painful associations for her. But this was a time of healing, a time she could cherish.

Alisa’s life was one of fulfillment now. She had reconciled with her family, and with Velor, and with the changes there. Lillith had become a Protector. And by her side there was Andre, who had found a true self, even if it wasn’t his original true self, and who doted on the children as much as she did.

She suddenly wanted to talk about that with Klara, setting aside serious matters. The children were in the capital, with David and Andre, sightseeing.

“The day Trina was born, Andre kidded me, saying ‘You’ve turned into a full-time regular Naturalist.’ And one of the young Kalik cousins was there, and asked. ‘What’s a nachurlist?’ and he said, ‘She studies nature, what do you think?’ And he was laughing his head off, and Erzhebet didn’t know what it was all about.”

“Here’s looking at you, Naturalist!” Klara said, and winked at her while flashing a dawn’s eye jewel from Madstop.



## Chapter Thirteen

“So we’re related,” Kyreen asked.

“Only as remote in-laws,” said Dr. Rafish. “Very remote. Through my wife. Tanzrobi did use to export mercenaries. Back when it was a free world. But only the lower septs, those least enhanced by the Galen. Never the higher septs, though. And never after the conquest. Tanya’s people were fugitives, just like the rest of the Aureans here.

“But you speak Aurean.”

“Something I had to learn here, when I decided to stay. It’s a prerequisite for doing business, or science. Particularly genetic research, which is what both the Gwyndylyn and the Church were up to, although only to very limited ends.”

“They call it lifecipher science on Westfold.”

“A quaint term, but appropriate. It is all a matter of codes, the codes that make us what we are. Physically, at any rate. I must confess that I was surprised to learn how far they’d gotten on your planet, with so little to go on.”

“The records from my ship...”

“As interpreted by a young girl. It was still a leap of imagination for them, as great a leap as the physics of wormholes or the technology of the quantum electric drive.”

“Andre and Alisa told me about those.”

“You’re another great leap. I’d never have imagined that the Aureans would have produced a Tanzrobian Tset’lar, or gal’lar as they say here. But they did a perfect job, and you’re a perfect woman.”

Kyreen felt a warm flush. David liked to call her a perfect woman, too, when they were making love.

“And you’re going to have a perfect baby, too. It’s a simple matter of a specially-tailored GenEnhance drug for the fetus.”

“A drug, that’s all it takes?”

“We call it a drug for the sake of convenience. But it’s more like a genetic cocktail, similar but not identical to the natural retrovirus inherent in the original genome of the Supremis. Something I helped develop here. But that was after my own Enhancement by Lara – in the old-fashioned way.”

Kyreen felt a flush again, remembering how David had been taken care of by Lillith in the “old fashioned way.”

“We’ll have to put you under gold to administer the GenEnhance,” Dr, Rafish said, getting right back to business. “You’d be too tight, otherwise, for anything short of an enhanced penis. I should have the specific ready in a couple of days. Meanwhile, let’s get out of the office. It’s time for a break, and I’d like you to meet my family.”

\* \* \*

Dr. Rafish lived in a house built into the side of a mountain that lay past the forest bordering the Rivera grounds. He and Kyreen made a leisurely walk of it, following a narrow path that meandered through the trees. About halfway to the Rafish home, there was a memorial plaque set in concrete. The inscription read simply:

**1052-11-03**

“The day I almost died,” Dr. Rafish said. “Others weren’t as lucky. I was a Marine in those days, and we were dropped in on a mission to rescue Alisa. We’d only just found

out they hated Velorians here, and we were afraid for her. Durgin was, anyway – has she told you about him?”

“Only that he led the first Kelsorian expedition here.”

“No fond memories of him on her part, I’ll warrant. But I’ll say this for the man: he came with us, and almost got killed himself in the bargain. He was never a coward. Now the strangest thing about the fight was that the Guardians who attacked us were from the Rivera – the Gwyndylyn. And they were harboring Lara, which certainly didn’t endear them to the Church of the Betans. Anyway, it was my luck to be attacked by Tanya. We’ll have to tell you about that later, It’s quite a story.”

Dr. Rafish had called Tanya on the com beforehand, so she was waiting for them at the front door, with a couple of children in their teens.

“Kyreen, meet Tanya. She’s a woman to die for, and I almost did. And these are our youngest children, Korak and Dejah.”

“I’m honored to meet you.”

Tanya reached out with both hands and squeezed Kyreen’s breasts – hard. Korak and Dejah giggled. Kyreen was startled.

“You’re supposed to reciprocate,” Korka said with a chuckle.

Kyreen reached out tentatively, and gave Tanya’s breasts a light squeeze.

“Harder,” Tanya said. “It’s a Velorian custom Alisa taught us.”

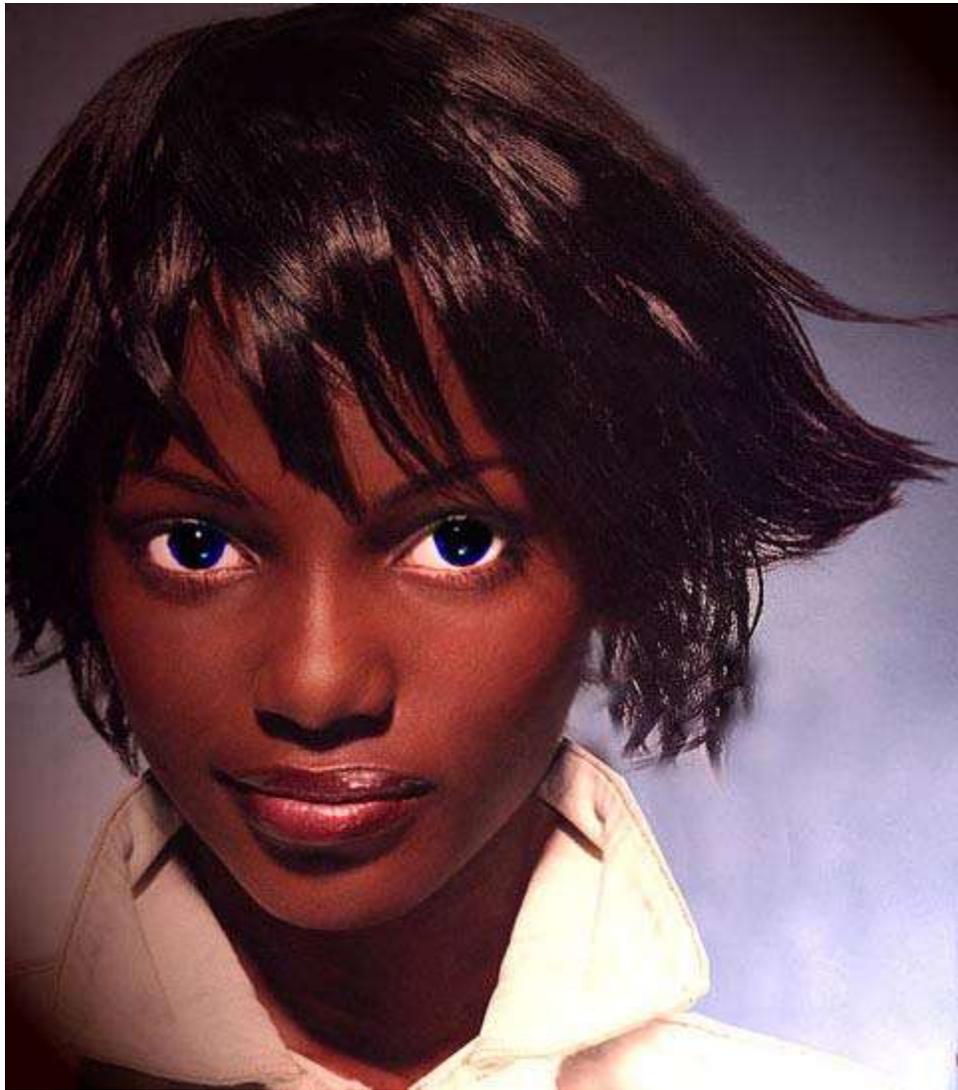
“She never tried it with me,” Kyreen said. But she squeezed as hard as she could.

“That’s more like it,” Tanya said with a sigh. Korak and Dejah tittered.

After a moment, she grinned, and invited them all inside. The home was spacious, with furniture suspended from the ceiling on what Nevil – she was thinking of him as Nevil by now – said were Vendorian steel wires.

“Makes things easier for the robot cleaners,” he explained. “No sense in us doing housework, anyway – wouldn’t be any real exercise for us. We’d rather toss boulders.”

Tanya half smiled.



“We only do that for public works. On construction projects, or if there’s been a landslide.”

“Not too many of those,” Nevil said. “But we save public works a lot of obols when they do come.”

Over lunch, the Rafishes talked family.

“We have a couple of other children,” Tanya said. “Thuvia’s working in the capital as a curator at the Underground Museum, and Tanar’s at München – he’s in applied anti-gravity technology, but that’s all pretty hush-hush.”

“I’d like to get into that,” Dejah said. “It would give me a real lift.”

“You shouldn’t be talking about that,” Nevil cautioned her.

“I agree,” Tanya added.

“I’ll probably end up working at the Institute,” Korak said, “But I’d like to see some of the rest of the Galaxy first.”

“Time enough to think of that once you’ve got your degree in Biotech,” Nevil said.

“So how did you two meet,” Kyreen asked him.

“In the heat of battle. And then we started generating another kind of heat. When we made it the first time, he was wearing a Vendorian exoskeleton supported by a force field generator. I managed to rip the armor away from his crotch, but his cock was still protected by the field. Lucky for him. Lucky for me, too!”

“Like a condom,” Kyreen said. “Only ours are made from sheep gut.”

“After the troubles were over, Lara saw to it I wouldn’t need that kind of protection again. Should we tell her about our first foreplay?”

“Shooting at me with your plasma gun? Terrans seem to get off on that sort of thing everywhere they encounter Supremis.”

“As if you didn’t,” Nevil said.

“It was the same on Westfold,” Kyreen said. “They said it was military research.”

“A likely story,” Tanya said.

Korak and Dejah had taken it all without showing a trace of embarrassment. That sort of thing, too, seemed to be the way of things among Supremis.

“Seriously, though,” Nevil said. “Being enhanced isn’t just about fun and games, although we’ve had plenty of those. It’s about being able to live longer, and more fully. You’re probably too young to appreciate that, Kyreen.”

“Perhaps not...”

“If it weren’t for what happened here, I’d probably have stayed with the Marines and then taken retirement on Kelsor and then maybe taken to drink with nothing else to do. I’d certainly never have returned here and studied for six years and become a doctor and gone into engineering research.”

“What led you to that?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I wanted to share my good fortune with others. I’d share it with the entire Galaxy if I could.”

## **Chapter Fourteen**

“Was this really the headquarters of the human underground?” Trina asked. “Looks to me like some crummy old ground car garage.”

“It was a crummy old ground car garage,” Thuvia said, a tone of irritation in her voice. “The underground couldn’t exactly advertise itself, now could it? Of course, they held a lot of their meetings at remote locations. Beaches and the like. But there’s nothing to preserve there but the sand.”

Their guide, another African, was curator of the place. Lara had recommended her, and the place, and suggested that touring the capital would be educational for him as well as Andre and the Kalik children. But David suspected it was just to get him out of the way while Alisa had a talky-talk with Klara, who was supposed to be the real power here on Rostran, and who had just checked in this morning. Kyreen was back at the Institute, meeting with that doctor, so he was the odd man out.

Nothing here at the museum meant anything to him. There were portraits and even kinos of interviews with people like Thomas Harnig and Dargrin Cooper, whose very names meant nothing to him. There were all sorts of references to the Church and the Gwyndylyn, which Lillith tried to explain to him but still went over his head – even the roles of Alisa and Andre, whom he knew, were hard to follow. As for key players of the local Supremis like Talak and Aayla and Marla – it was all a blur.

For David, it only aggravated the sensory overload. After three days of flitters and ground cars that had some sort of engines that didn’t use steam, after three days of watching crowds of incredibly fit people who must have some sort of jobs he couldn’t imagine but that he saw only at their leisure shopping and dining and meeting friends and talking on those miniature telelogs or whatever they had glued to their ears... he’d had enough.

He missed Westfold.

The next stop on this seemingly interminable tour was a stadium where the Great Revolution had come to a head, 30 years or so ago. There was going to be a Scumbles game there, Andre said. A Velorian import.

And I'm missing the cricket test match in Stanton, he told himself ruefully.

"You'll love it," Andre insisted. "The München Maniacs are in town to challenge the Capital Clerics. They say it's a real grudge match."

Well where else did he have to go?

Anywhere else might have been better, as David saw it. Scumbles turned out to be sort of a cross between rugby and a street brawl. Players threw each other as well as the ball about. If there were any rules, he couldn't figure out what they were, except for the play sometimes being stopped by flashing red lights and then starting up again with flashing green lights.

Yet Lillith and Trina loved it, and even Andre seemed to know when to cheer and when to boo. That latter was whenever the Clerics scored a goal – Andre didn't like the Clerics. Once or twice he called them "monyks;" this was apparently a serious insult, because some nearby Clerics fans started yelling at him about it. That prompted Lillith and Trina to join him in yelling back.

David was afraid it might turn into a fight, but then the Maniacs scored a go-ahead goal and there was pandemonium on the field and in the stands. When the Maniacs held on and won the match, there was even some impromptu sex.

Afterwards, Andre insisted on asking him what he thought about the whole thing. That was after Lillith took off in pursuit of one of the players...

“I read once that they had something called gladiators back on Earth who’d fight to the death.”

“That was nothing like Scrumbles,” Andre said. “Besides, the players are Betans – they aren’t going to get killed, or seriously hurt.”

David was glad to get back to the hostel. He hoped Kyreen wouldn’t be kept too much longer at the Rivera. Maybe he could go out there tomorrow.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Are you aware that lufts have shown up on the black market?” Alisa asked. “it is widely believed on Enlightenment worlds that they were developed by the Aureans.”

“An unfortunate lapse in security, involving rogue Scalantran adopts,” Klara said. “It won’t happen again. We do not believe that the Empire is capable of miniaturization to the degree necessary to produce their own. Strap-on units, perhaps, but those wouldn’t be practical in combat situations.”

“GenEnhance has also shown up on Enlightenment worlds.”

“An experiment. In a sector left unprotected during the Binkley’s World campaign. I would hope that Velor has learned from that mistake. But the consignment was limited, and Varig was judged incapable of replicating the technology involved.”

“Still the same old Klara. Taking things into your own hands.”

“Would you have it any other way? And it isn’t as if you don’t have a Machiavellian streak of your own.”

“My methods are more subtle.”

“Except in the case of Westfold.”

“An emergency. For Rostran as well as Kelsor and the Enlightenment.”

“Which is why you’ll get your flying Primes. I’ll send to München for the very latest luft units. They’ve made substantial improvements in directional control; our warriors will be able to turn on an obol – if only they had coins floating around in space.”

“We’ll be ready to go as soon as Dr. Rafish is through with Kyreen,” Alisa said.

“I’ll send out a call for volunteers,” Klara said. “It shouldn’t be hard if we offer them luft upgrades free of charge. Hell, we’ll even throw in free replacements if they go bad.”

\* \* \*

“It’s the stabilization of the viral elements that makes it practical,” Nevil said. “That was always the problem with doing things the natural way.”

“But wasn’t the natural way more fun?” Kyreen said. “That’s how it seemed with my David and Lillith.”

“A bit of *ex’tosy* there, as they call it on Velor. “On Dr. Morrison’s part, that is; Lillith doesn’t have any... attachments. But seriously, there were always rejection issues with natural Enhancement – people like to talk about the successes rather than the failures. We’ve learned to minimize the risks, as I’m sure Alisa did in David’s case, but still... in any case, the procedure for your fetus is an entirely different matter.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Now open wide.”

It was a joke. Kyreen couldn’t really open her vagina, but under gold she could at least relax it enough to accommodate the Vendorian steel syringe. Nevil triggered the injection.

Kyreen tried to imagine the viral elements wriggling their way to her womb. Nevil withdrew the syringe after a moment.

“Too fast,” she said. “Not like having David inside me.” That was also a joke.

“Were you jealous of Liliith when...”

“Who do you suppose helped Alisa hold her down? They explained it all to me, but not to David. He didn’t even know what it was all about until we called him in. But I did. And I knew what I was going to get out of it.”

“I’ll bet he was surprised.”

“Especially when Andre shot him in the balls after he came out of the fever. Was he ever in a fever for me after that!”

“Perhaps I should have Tanya... but it wouldn’t be a surprise for me.”

“So, this is it? It’s all done?”

“We’ll have to do a reading in a few hours. Make sure it took.”

“Now that will call for a celebration,” she said. “Like the Emperor’s birthday back on Aurea.”

“Why would you mention...? But of course... I think that’s coming up in about three months. Not that it matters. You won’t have to wait here anywhere near that long!”

The procedure took. Kyreen actually got back to the hostel before David did. When he arrived home from a day of sightseeing, she was there to greet him. Definitely a sight for sore eyes...

She rolled over and undid the tiny thong she was wearing, opening the gateway to paradise between her legs.



“And you’re going to be a daddy too,” she said afterwards. Long afterwards

### **Interlude Three**

“Why is the Emperor’s birthday so important?” Andre asked.

“It probably isn’t,” said Alisa. “But it *might* be, and we can’t afford to overlook it. It’s his Jubilee Year, after all.”

“Aurean years or Galactic Standard?”

“Aurean. But it translates into 113 g-days from now. So we have to be ready, in case the Empire does choose the occasion to make its move.”

“Did Kyreen have any idea?”

“Only a vague notion. She was really surprised when she mentioned it and I took it seriously. Then she was embarrassed.”

“It could still be nothing,” Andre said.

“In which case our primes will have a long wait. Like Gatekeepers.”

“Only, they won’t have the same recreational opportunities...”

Alisa actually blushed at that, even though it was a stale joke about where male primes could put lufts.

“Let’s put all that aside,” she said after a moment. “There’s still the matter of what’s to happen afterwards.”

“It’ll be pure trickery.”

“But inspired trickery.”

• • •

There was room enough in the *Andre’s Flame* for a dozen primes, carefully chosen for beauty and ethnic mix. They’d spent several weeks training with the lufts off Nomi, the larger moon of Rostran, and by now their maneuvers were as precise as the moves in a Scrumbles game.

“David didn’t see anything precise in those at all,” Andre said. “He was bored out of his gourd. At least Lillith had fun. But I think she totally wore out that Maniac forward.”

“Only a Betan, after all.”

“We’ll have to schedule more practices off the Westfold wormhole exit, after we drop off David and Kyreen. And that very special gift you got them. It’ll be an eye opener for sure.”

“But a gold crib’s going to be a necessity for their newborn,” Alisa said. “Some of the time, at least. I hope they can teach Aminata to mind her own strength before she can walk, or fly.”

They already knew the child was going to be a girl, of course.

“Too bad we can’t be there for the main event,” Andre said.

“David can record it with the vid we gave them.”

“Not the actual...”

“Of course not. But holding her in her arms. That sort of thing.”

“And when the time comes, our little trick.”

## Chapter Sixteen

Hillary was the first to step off the omnibus at the Stanton depot. It was a bright day in mid-Greening season.

It had been pleasantly warm for days now, and the dormant buds on the trees back home were springing into bloom. But there was nothing remarkable about this particular day. It wasn’t a holiday, nor a Sabbath day, nor their anniversary, nor anyone’s birthday that she knew of.

“Why did Kyreen want us coming all the way down here today, that’s what I’d like to know,” John said as he followed her off the bus. “And why meet her at Government Square?”

“She must want to make some sort of announcement, I suppose,” Hillary said. “Get it in the papers.”

“She wouldn’t have to come up here from New Oxford for that.”



Life was back to normal in the capital, they could see as they made their way into town. No runners checking everyone's IDs, no military drills. Nothing like that.

“You don’t have to watch the skies,” Kyreen had assured the world when she and David returned to Westfold as mysteriously as they had vanished. “My people are watching them for you. That’s what my journey was all about.”

She’d been showing by then, and war fever had given way to pregnancy fever. The birth of Aminata a few months later had made world headlines – somebody had even made a kino of the story, which got most of the facts wrong in addition to casting actors who looked nothing like the real people.

It was a good thing for the government, all that. It eclipsed revelations of abuses of authority, including the internment of David’s boss Dr. Abramson and even what was now suspected to be the murder of one Brigitte Keita. An official Enquiry was underway, but Abramson didn’t expect anything to come of it.

“They’ll let sleeping dogs lie,” he’d told her on the telelog after he was released, “Nobody liked her anyway.”

“That’s barmy,” she’d snapped back at him.

They hadn’t spoken since. But it must speak for the mood of the world or whatever that he’d say anything like that on wire, where it could be intercepted. The Constabulary and the military had done a lot of that during the emergency, the papers were saying.

When they got to Government Square, there was already a crowd forming. That was bound to happen whenever Kyreen made an appearance. The papers had been tipped off, because there were picture-taking crews as well as journalists with their over-size notebooks pressing their way forward. There was even a kino maker with his heavy apparatus mounted on a steamcart. Runners were trying to keep order.

“Comin’ through,” John said to one of them

“Right you are,” said the runner, clearing a way for them. Nothing like that deputy who’d given them such a hard time back home. The Kiplingers were back to being too important to slight.

Kyreen was holding Aminata closely, less to avoid dropping her than to keep her from floating off. David had his left arm around her, and both were smiling broadly, like proud parents.

In his right hand, David was holding the miniature picture-taking device they’d first seen in New Oxford, along with the golden crib, shortly after the couple had returned. It was on the same day that they’d learned what the Aureans had done for David.

“A wedding present,” Kyreen had called it.

“When’s the wedding, that’s what I’d like to know,” John had asked. “Have I got to hold a gun to you?”

“That’s the whole point,” David said. “A gun wouldn’t help any more.”

But they were married a couple of days later, by a friendly magistrate who didn’t let the word get out until afterwards. They managed to keep Aminata’s birth, too, a private affair – John and Hilary had come in disguise.

“So what’s all the fuss about today?” John asked, once they’d made it to where David and Kyreen were standing.

“Watch the skies,” said Kyreen.

David checked his watch. “It should happen just about now.”

He let go of Kyreen, and held the picture-taking device in front of him, aiming it upwards.

In the days and seasons to come, kino houses would be playing the scene again and again, along with kino conversions of the recordings Kyreen supplied of the battle in space that took out the “Velorian” ship. It wasn’t much of a battle, as space battles went – over in a few minutes. But nobody on Westfold besides David and Kyreen knew that.

In years to come, that battle, and today’s demonstration, would become part of the world’s cultural memory, only gradually dispelled by the truth, as Westfold was made ready for that truth.

But for John and Hilary and all the others assembled at Government Square, it was something immediate and overwhelming.

Just cluster of dots in the sky at first; they might have been birds flying in perfect formation.

Only they grew before the crowd’s eyes, revealing themselves at last as flying women, warriors in black and silver uniforms, coming in victory to claim the applause and appreciation of the world they had saved.

*“Blimey!”* said John.

*“Blinding!”* said Hillary.

It wasn’t long before people in the crowd were having their pictures taken with the new arrivals. That was after the inevitable group shots of the Primes with David and Kyreen, and even with John and Hilary themselves.

“It’s all so luvverly jubberly,” Kyreen told them as they posed for the picture-taker, holding Aminata again, flanked by her family and the Primes.

John almost spoiled the shot with a double take.

*But then she's one of us, he realized. Knows the lingo. Knows when and where to use it. Like now. Like it's our day."*

And so it was.