

Encounter at Westfold

Part One

By Shadar, revised by Brantley

Prologue

Dr. David Morrison was trying to save the Aurean from his fellow men. Even if she didn't want to be saved.

From the day the alien ship had meteorically entered the dense atmosphere of Westfold, he'd tried to protect the young girl he'd found in the wreckage from both exploitation and arrogance. She'd been seven years old then, and the only survivor of the flaming crash.

The men of Westfold knew nothing about her that wasn't obvious to the eye, or that she didn't know about herself. That her skin was dark, her heritage clearly African, and her eyes were large and blue. She knew that her name was Kyreen, but didn't know her family name. She only knew that she missed her parents, who'd sent her away on that ship.

The rest Morrison discovered only over time. That she was incalculably strong. That she couldn't be hurt. That she could see through things, or make things disappear just by looking at them. That she could not be tethered to the ground by the mere force of gravity.

The engineers from the College of Natural Philosophy, where Morrison taught, managed to retrieve a portion of the ship's log and other records from the wreckage. It took them years to decipher it, even with the help of Kyreen, who had to be taught English but who in turn had shown them how to access electronic files – something they had never seen before.

What they found in those records, which Kyreen herself had transcribed lest they be lost by the failure of the electronic systems, had shaken the confidence of an entire world. For they learned that there were powerful and warlike races out there. Races that were attempting to enslave all mankind.

The fact that there were previously unknown aliens didn't shock them, for Westfold was a seeded world. But the Seeders had left them with no histories other than those of Earth, which were two hundred years out of date. The Seeders had said little about themselves or other peoples, and that little had been garbled into myth. And in the long two centuries since they'd arrived, they'd had no contact with anyone not born on Westfold.

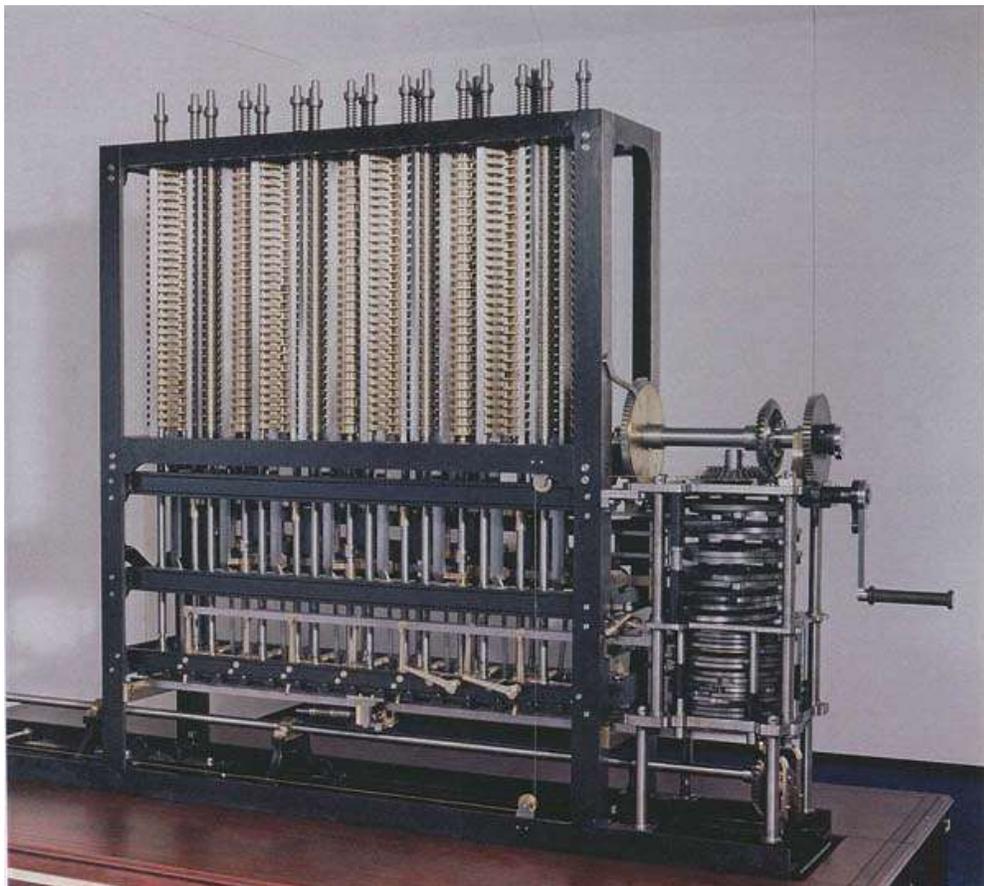
Until Kyreen landed among them.

The recovered fragments from the Aurean logs filled in only a few of the gaps, and created many more. The final log entry, describing the Aurean ship's arrival in this system, described Westfold as a remote world, off the trading pathways. A Haven.

Reading back through the logs, and accessing what pieces of linked data that remained ungarbled, they learned that the Aureans were part of an Empire, and that a brutal enemy called the Enlightenment was threatening to destroy them.

The logs also described the ship's mission: transporting one of the Empire's special children to a safe haven, a place where she'd not be found until she was ready to engage the Enlightenment and destroy its hated warriors -- their deadly Protectors.

Frightened by the Aurean description of a universe in flames, and lacking weapons powerful enough to engage the Enlightenment Westfold had worked desperately to reverse engineer whatever remained of the ship's electronic and military technology. It hadn't been easy, even with the help of Kyreen – a child prodigy as it turned out, and eager to please to the point of naïveté.



“Fifty years of progress in five.”

Prime Minister MacDonald Ramsey claimed credit for the slogan. So did several of his aides. But nobody disputed the seriousness of the challenge that faced Westfold, a world settled towards the end of the 18th Century, Earth count, with the Seeder ships bringing a few late arrivals at the beginning of the 19th Century.

The discovery that their world might be invaded from space touched off a global panic. Clearer heads soon realized that the only hope for Westfold's survival as a free planet lay in a technological revolution on a scale that staggered the imagination.

Westfoldans had never thought of their world as being primitive; indeed, they were proud of their achievements in steam power and electricity, in the construction of railroads and high roads, in agriculture and medicine – the Seeders had assisted in that last, by teaching them the germ theory of disease.

But when Kyreen had arrived, Westfold had known nothing more advanced for computation and information processing than mechanical calculators. It had not known telecommunication or even telephones, having relied for long-distance communication on optical and later electrical telegraphy. It had known nothing of atomic energy or energy weapons.

Its military -- devoted primarily to fighting ocean pirates and occasional uprisings by Levelers and other miscreants -- relied on rifles and artillery and fire bombs and rockets. The latest advance was stitching guns, a variation on what were called – although none here could know it – machine guns on old Earth.

Something else Westfold had never known was the science of genetics, although its farmers were skilled in selective breeding of crops and livestock and there had been considerable advances in medicine, from surgery to drugs and vaccines. Public health

services and sanitation would have been the envy of their remote ancestors in London or Birmingham or -- for even more -- West Africa.

But as it sought desperately to catch up with the kind of technology it might soon have to face, Westfold had two great advantages. First, it boasted a strong tradition of scientific education, and with the translation of the Aurean records, its researchers were given a treasure trove of priceless information on a silver platter. Ramsey's contribution lay in recruiting the youngest and most adaptable minds to study that data, and to work with the best engineers to put it to practical use.

The second great advantage Westfold had was that Kyreen was black. She struck a responsive chord with the black portion of the population, which was represented in the Legislature by the African Congress. Slavery had never been allowed on Westfold, but Africans still lagged behind the whites in education and wealth. Ramsey reached out to them now, giving them several key cabinet appointments, including War.

Seiko Tourimi, the new Minister of War, found it deliciously ironic that Westfold was preparing for a war against white invaders. But he was certain that if those invaders did indeed come, it would go hardest for his own people. His support for the crash program in military technology, was unbounded, and the benefits of education and better jobs at retooled factories redounded to his people.

Kyreen was their heroine, but also the world's heroine. In time, as they observed Kyreen's growth, as they witnessed her unique abilities, the leading thinkers of Westfold began to scheme of ways to create another kind of weapon that could oppose anything the Enlightenment could direct toward them.

They called their weapon Promise.

Her foster parents, John and Hilary Kiplinger, continued to call her Kyreen.

Chapter One

It was a blustery day in late autumn when Dr. David Morrison found the note lying on his desk. A note his Admin hadn't put there.

The note was written in a precise longhand:

Kyreen is playing into their hands.

Meet me at Mickey's.

Tonight. 8 pm.

Alisa.

Morrison turned the note over to stare at the blank backside, then at the plain envelope. There was no clue as to the sender other than the signature. Queer!

Mickey's he knew about. It was a sports club along the beach that served a mixed crowd of faculty and students. Beach tennis, a sport that lately become a worldwide obsession, ran continuously from opening until its 2 a.m. close. Bets were for drinks and bragging rights. They also had dress-up nights, body painting nights. Anything for a jolly good time.

He looked at the signature again as he wracked his brain. Who the hell was Alisa? And whose hands was Kyreen playing into? The military?

He dropped the note into his inbox and sagged tiredly into his swivel chair, briefly allowing himself to imagine that Alisa was a young and stunningly beautiful student, all the go but down in her marks, offering a very first-rate evening in exchange for... He tried to think of anyone in his lectures who fit the profile.

Three remarkable ladies came to mind, one of them reading for organic chemistry, with a reputation for that sort of thing, but none of them were named Alisa. Sighing, he spun around to look out the window. The leaves were already turning their brilliant colors. Swashes of yellow and red were creeping down the hillsides from the cold summits. The original settlers had had been suffered to bring with them the seed stock for a great many deciduous trees, but no evergreens. The result: three beautiful seasons and one totally barren one.

Barren is the cruelest term, he mused. For some reason he couldn't look forward to Spring term, when greenery and a sense of life would return. Morrison turned back to sit at his desk, telling himself he wasn't really a player in the "flat dancing for orals" game, as he called it. Other than that one time when he was a mere tutor, and hinted about what he'd be asking in the trials in exchange for another kind of orals.

Women had been new to the College then, another consequence of Kyreen. The Commonwealth had decided that Westfold needed all the brains it could get for the conflict everyone feared. Even the most prejudiced admitted that women could read for medicine or the law, referencing *The Merchant of Venice* for the latter. That girl – he couldn't even remember her name now -- had gotten what she wanted from him, but he'd learned sadly that beauty and passion didn't always come in the same package.

It was just as well. He was a teaching fellow now, and fellows who developed reputations for being approachable by such women – and especially for approaching them uninvited -- inevitably lost their perspective, and eventually their jobs. Now that women were becoming fellows themselves, it was bad academic politics. Bad politics all

around. You could get nasty looks from the female dons; he'd seen one just the other day with a few of her students.



Had she been glaring at him? No, that was crazy. He didn't even know her, and he'd been careful to avoid any scandal. Not that he'd have had a problem hanging out

with students. He still looked young enough to date them without looking like a leech, but he didn't. With one exception. *The* exception.

For three years, he'd been the lover of the most desirable woman on the planet. Kyreen Kiplinger. There were times when he could hardly believe it: out of all the ten million-odd adult males on the planet, most of whom must have ached to be in bed with her, had wet dreams about her, he was living a dream come true.

Just that past weekend, he'd been out canoeing with her. They'd traveled from Venture Harbor to Scripts Island just north of Giltown, and then down to City Harbor, a distance of nearly one hundred and eighty miles. An impossible distance for a single weekend if not for his companion's vigor.

It might have seemed a foolhardy adventure, given that she was the most famous woman in the world. But, knowing how important she was, Prime Minister Ramsey had pushed through legislation making Kyreen Kiplinger off limits to the media except for official occasions. The penny press was even banned from coming within a mile of her home or, later, her quarters at the College.

It went without saying that Kyreen had provided most of the muscle that weekend. It also didn't hurt that she was a burning bush abed, and it didn't even bother him that she was bisexual -- a common enough persuasion for educated women native to this world. He liked open-minded women who had beautiful girlfriends. Share and share alike, or so he liked to say.

Kyreen had proven to be passionate and fun-loving beyond belief, and the two of them had celebrated the completion of the first leg of their journey on a hidden beach behind Scripts Island. She was even more extraordinary at sex than at paddling, what

with her tight body and unworldly fitness, not to mention all 6'2" of her. They'd even managed to do it later in the middle of City Harbor, in the canoe no less, a feat requiring nearly impossible agility – and as nearly impossible care to avoid a spill.

Kyreen's athleticism and sense of balance were legendary. So was her supply of 24K gold jewelry, a remarkable possession, its value legendary but incalculable, given that Westfold was completely devoid of that rare metal – its currency was based on silver. If not for the gold they'd salvaged from the Aurean ship, his relations with Kyreen would have been much poorer. He was very fond of what that gold did to her.

Yet even while wearing gold from head to toe, she was inhumanly strong. It was humbling to realize that she'd had to work very hard not break his back, for she was a very enthusiastic lover. Fortunately, long hours in the gym and inborn athletic prowess made him strong as well.

The genetic stock of Westfold had included some of the best Earth had to offer – along with British transportees and captured Africans abducted from penal ships and slavers. Morrison's family came of a high-born British line, from the kind of men who had learned leadership in the lecture halls and on the playing fields of Eton -- if you could believe old tales handed down through seven generations.

But Kyreen was something else again. He'd been a member of the survey party that had investigated the wreckage and he was the one who'd found Kyreen buried in a small cave in the solid rock beneath the engine compartment. He'd heard her sobbing, and had helped her dig herself out. Remarkably, she was completely unharmed.

As a faculty member of the Biology Department, he'd participated in the study of the other alien remains on the ship. That had given him an inside track in the new science

of genetics, and Kyreen had been his tutor – a role reversal that somehow hadn't embarrassed him. He'd later helped incorporate some elements of Aurean genetics into humans as part of a very hush-hush project that he eventually came to oppose.

Naturally, the military wanted no part of him opting out. So despite his reluctance, he'd been taken with the other members of the College's fledgling Genetics Research Group to a demonstration at a nearby base.

Once there, the soldiers dressed them in protective clothing and hearing protectors, and walked them out to stand behind an array of weapons, traditional and advanced. Then, from high overhead, Kyreen appeared as if by magic, dropping from the bright sky to land barefoot in front of a wall that was said to rival the Great Wall of China back on Earth – something their ancestors had read about but never seen.

She was already known to them by then as the Promise. Defender of Westfold. Morrison thought that was a very heavy burden to rest on the slender shoulders of a 14-year-old girl.

General Richard Multon had given a command, and the weapons had all trained on the slip of a girl. He gave another command, and the ripping-cloth roar of the stitching guns tore the air apart, the bullets slamming the young girl against the thick wall, and filling the air before her with a million pieces of shattered stone and shredded clothing. Her skin rippled from the impact like the surface of a pond during a cloudburst.

Before Morrison could be offended by the girl's sudden nakedness, the fire bomb artillery opened up. This time, Kyreen vanished into an inferno of burning rock oil – the kind that had often incinerated pirate ships and the pirates with them. But when the

smoke cleared, the girl was standing there like a flaming effigy, until the fuel was spent and she was revealed as still naked – but filthy.

The pièce de résistance was supposed to be the laser cannon, the latest advance in military technology here although evidently familiar elsewhere in the universe. It was impressive at first, the actinic beams sizzling as they flashed at light-speed across the gap to heat Kyreen's body to incandescence. But then came a "whump," and the cannon slumped. It turned out later that the design was flawed, and heat losses had built up.

One good thing came of it, at least for the officers and other men with binoculars: Kyreen was now naked *and* clean. But Multon, a veteran white officer of the old school, apparently hadn't liked her pouty look, and ordered the conventional field artillery to fire on the girl – bringing down entire wall on her. She simply dug herself out, none the worse for wear, and then flew off in a huff.

The military had been embarrassed by the failure of the laser cannon, and by the lack of progress on particle beam weapons. A decade earlier, Westfold hadn't even heard of the particles involved, but now researchers here were trying desperately to find a means of projecting them with a device smaller than a house.

Morrison leaned back in his office chair now, eyes closed, recalling how angry the officer had been. He wasn't used to seeing his powerful weapons defeated that way. Fortunately -- or unfortunately for Kyreen, as Morrison saw it -- the military leadership began to pay a great deal more attention to Genetics after that demonstration.

They were intelligent men and they had good imaginations, and they were busy imagining facing an invading army of such beings. Which made them afraid. They were

trying every way they could think of to hedge their bets, and there was the added advantage that the genetic program was less costly.

The crash program in military technology was costing a fortune and, while it also created jobs and made a lot of people wealthy, it had seriously skewed Westfold's economy. Much of the civilian technological base was unchanged, despite introduction of wondrous devices like telephonoscopes and kinographs. Steam power still dominated transportation and industry, although the primitive pre-contact electric grid had been improved and expanded.

Morrison pushed such thoughts away, losing himself instead in his far fonder memories of a more grown-up Kyreen. She was 21 now, and trying to catch up on her formal education after years as a military lab rat. She was a quick study – no need for any favors. She'd soaked up his tutorials on the ecology of Westfold like a sponge, and been surprised to learn how the study of comparative biology of imported and native life forms had given scientists here their first inklings into evolution.

"There'd been talk about creatures in Australia – that's where our ancestors thought they were going – that looked like dogs but weren't really dogs," he'd explained at the outset. "And we have the same sort of thing here. Only more so: the dires can't possibly be related to wolves, and the moots can't possibly be kin to cattle. All the same, they fill the same niches – which created problems for our dogs and livestock until we got them under control."

"But you told me this world doesn't have the Terran trees you call evergreens," Kyreen observed during a later session. "Surely there should be a niche here for native equivalents."

“One would suppose,” said Morrison. “But if so, it’s an empty niche. We don’t know why. And the native trees don’t look just like our deciduous imports, either. We treasure our trees. They’re a reminder of where we came from and who we are. But we do miss those others.”

“I don’t think we have anything like them on Aurea. Not that I really saw. Aurea. I was in this place all the time. I think it was a secret place. I was a secret. They were going to tell me more, I think, after we landed here. But the Betas didn’t survive.”

Will we survive? Morrison wondered.

He had found solace against such somber thoughts. Their intimacies on weekends had been a catharsis for him, allowing him to express for the first time the emotions he'd held inside his heart for the last 12 years. They'd also left him feeling guilty about becoming far too involved in a project he abhorred.

Lost in his memories, he didn't hear the door open to admit Dr. John Abramson to his office. Abramson was in his early sixties but looked younger, his hair and mustache only beginning to show traces of gray and giving him the distinguished look that only academic types seem able to pull off. Abramson was also rector of the Biology Faculty, which made him Morrison’s superior.

Abramson looked appraisingly at his protégé as he sat in his chair, daydreaming, the obvious flush of his skin and tightening of his pants telling him more about his fancies than he wanted to know. Yet instead of retreating, as propriety would dictate, he cleared his throat before asking gruffly, "Waiting for the hooter to blow, David?"

Morrison started so quickly that he nearly fell out of his chair. He quickly regained his balance and then his composure, finally grinning sheepishly up at his boss. "Just

catching a few. It's been a rough week. But I can't complain. After all, we're making progress."

Abramson nodded, the stern look on his face never fading. He was perfectly aware of Morrison's weekend plans with Kyreen, and felt a twinge of jealous resentment. For despite her beauty, she'd formed few relationships with men in the past, preferring the company of women. She also happened to be a rising star in his pre-med program, having earned top marks in public school before proving herself to be brightest young student to come to the College in a long while.

Morrison arranged the papers on his desk, then looked up at his superior. "What I *will* complain about, John, is that nobody but me is figuring how to keep Brigitte from executing her 'next great leap.'"

Morrison could speak freely, as he and John Abramson were among the handful of people who had been engaged for the last decade in human genetic enhancement. They'd found ways to harvest DNA from the occupants of the crashed ship, and had recently devised a means, using gold and extremely high-energy x-rays to extract some scrapings from Kyreen's mucous membranes. They'd used those harvested genes to complete an in-vitro fertilization of one of Kyreen's ova, using enhanced sperm from a human donor.

Dr. David Morrison's sperm to be exact.

It was too early to tell, only a month had passed, but there was hope that Kyreen was about to bear a daughter who shared most of her remarkable traits. Morrison abhorred the project, especially since he hadn't given consent to use his DNA, nor had Kyreen – or before that her family – ever authorized her involvement. More importantly,

despite his fondness for her, he had no desire to hand over the future of humanity to a superior race of her offspring.

Even worse, he worried that her extravagant passion last weekend had been only an attempt to legitimize his fatherhood. Or her pregnancy. Either way, she made a point of telling him that he was her only sexual partner now. At least until she was too far into her pregnancy to wear gold. That wouldn't be long, Morrison figured, for her daughter's kicks would soon be those of a young Prime. Kyreen was going to need all her fabled invulnerability to carry such a child.

"And here I thought you and Kyreen were going to hit it off?" Abramson almost sneered, as if he didn't know better. "She's been an obsession of yours since she was nine."

"I think she discovered women before men," Morrison replied wearily, going along with the farce. It was no secret that bisexuality was common among intellectual women on Westfold, who resented the patriarchal attitudes of most men but still hoped the right kind of men would come along...

"Brigitte and Kyreen have their own passions. No need to be distracted by mine. This is the 30's after all. Live and let live."

Abramson had done most of the pioneering work in Enhancement Genetics, and that was what had drawn Morrison and Brigitte Keita into the project. Together, they'd perfected a means of replicating the special genetic material they'd harvested from the dead occupants of the Aurean ship, and combining it with human DNA.

He'd had a falling out with Brigitte a year ago, and had since become a dissenter, trying to discourage the military side of Brigitte's research. That decision had put him at odds with both Abramson and Brigitte.

Fortunately, Abramson had later sided with Morrison when it became known that Brigitte had used his DNA without consent. They had seen that as her transparent attempt to end Morrison's objections to the project by involving him in it at its the core.

What no one knew was that Morrison had almost bought into Brigitte's project at first. If not for the heavy hand of the Commonwealth, which had twisted it so, he knew he'd still be in the middle of it all. Instead, he'd opted out of that branch of genetics and had refocused his work on applying the new genetic knowledge to curing diseases.

Aurean genetics were capable of amazing feats of self-regeneration and disease resistance. Years before, he'd gotten permission to work with Kyreen, back when she was only 12 years old. He'd exposed her to every pathogen in the book, including the most deadly military bugs. The worst she'd gotten was a sniffle.

Unfortunately, while finding genetic cures was an interesting field, especially if you were sick, his work was underfunded and buried behind the glamour of defending the planet. By creating an army of enhanced female warriors. Never mind that it would take several generations – Kyreen's children and grandchildren – to create even a corporal's guard.

Brigitte had claimed to be working to fix what she called "the gender side-effect," allowing for male warriors. Morrison wasn't so sure she wasn't doing the opposite, for she had long ago joined a sisterhood composed of exclusively sapphic women. She

was increasingly buying into the propaganda of female superiority, and he'd overheard her laughing about "supremacy in a test tube" more than once.

Brigitte had also restricted her work to using strictly African-based DNA after she'd found she could get a much greater response from that genetic mix than she could from their paler counterparts. It was a finding in complete opposition to what little had been known about Aurean genetics. But given that Kyreen shared such a heritage, and that half the residents of Westfold were of West African heritage, it was a promising lead.

It would make the African Congress happy, if Brigitte ever went public and it came to a concurrent vote of the Legislature. Morrison suspected that if she ever got her way, Westfold would someday be populated by black, female highers. Morrison wasn't sure what role white men would have in that new world order, if any. But it would take many generations, in any case, unless she came up with some way to create higher powers by injection rather than birth.

Kyreen, to her credit, hadn't found Brigitte's sapphic power agenda appealing. Nor her focus on black power. That was one more reason that Morrison found himself intrigued by Kyreen. She wanted to live a normal life, to become a doctor, a researcher like himself. To use her brain, not her brawn. To live a bisexual, not a sapphic, life.

Morrison felt a twinge of guilt for ever having used her as a test subject. *Hubris*. He picked up the handwritten note from his inbox, and handed it to Abramson.

"Any idea what this is about?"

Abramson studied the note, his eyes opening wide as he saw the signature. "Jesus! Where did you get this?"

"It was on my desk this morning. Nice handwriting."

Abramson sat down hard in the desk chair, a worried look on his face.

"Okay. So why the rum countenance?" Morrison asked. He'd rarely seen his mentor looking so concerned.

"I... I can't tell you."

"Excuse me?" Morrison said darkly. The ever-increasing secrets of the Genetic Research Group were starting to get to him.

"I swore to keep... someone's secret."

"Someone? Like who?"

Abramson shook his head as he read the note again.

"Does this have anything to do with Brigitte's work?"

"Yes... and no," Adamson said with another shake of his head. "Brigitte has no idea that Alisa even exists. Nor does Kyreen. And I'm trying to keep it that way."

"I thought you chaps were still working together, despite--"

"Brigitte has got her head way too far into that Amazon shit," Abramson growled.

"Trust me... Alisa is the last person in the universe she needs to meet."

Abramson looked up to see the blank look on Morrison's face, and shrugged. "And God knows what would happen if Kyreen met her."

"Oh?" Morrison asked cautiously, completely confused. "What else?"

Abramson sighed. "Let's just say that I've found an alternative source for genetic enhancement. Possibly a better one."

"Better than Kyreen? That's impossible."

Abramson shook his head. "There are forces at work here of which you have little understanding. A universe in collision."

"Colliding? With what?"

"Alisa, for one."

"Damn it," Morrison said angrily. "You're talking in riddles. Does this have to do with the military or what?"

Abramson turned back to smiled crookedly at his protégé. "Strangely, you're almost right. But also completely wrong."

"Now I'm all at sixes and sevens," Morrison sighed, sagging back in his chair in exasperation.

"Wrong military."

"Okay," Morrison said, glaring at Adamson. "Do you have to kill me if you tell me?"

Adamson took a long breath, and let it out slowly. "You remember the data on that Aurean ship, David?"

"How could I forget? The weapons were--"

"I was talking about the DNA."

"Obviously. We've got Kyreen," Morrison shrugged. He didn't say, "and her baby."

"Well, Alisa's genetics are just as pure. Another complete overlay of human genes. But from a different perspective. Let's say, a blonde one."

Morrison just stared at him. "That means she's...."

"Not an Aurean," Abramson confirmed with a shake of his head. "Try the other side."

Morrison just stared at him, jaw falling open, with a cold sliver of fear twisting his gut.

He'd seen kinos from the Aurean records showing Enlightenment soldiers tearing armored vehicles apart with their bare hands, not to mention tossing soldier's around like rag dolls, bullets and energy beams splashing harmlessly against their skin. Like Brigitte's imagined warriors, they were all female.

He'd also seen Kyreen's abilities, but she'd never injured anyone. She never would.

"Then she's a..." The cold fear in Morrison's gut twisted tighter. He could not say the hated word. The common fear on Westfold that the Enlightenment might one day find them was the basis of the entire technological revolution.

"Correct."

"But how? Why?"

"She claims that her ship was on an exploration mission and simply happened upon us."

"A likely story. I suppose she has an even likelier story for having approached you."

"Only that she saw about Kyreen on the telly, and then did some cursory research. After all, she's hardly a secret. Our weapons program likewise. Except for the details, of course."

That much was true. The details might be secret, but everybody got the drift. And Westfoldans were continually being exhorted to do their bit, even if it wasn't directly part of the military research program. You couldn't watch the telly or go to a kinograph without some patriotic slogan being dinned into you -- usually "Brains will win the war!"

"Alisa assured me that we're well on the way to having the technology to protect Westfold from the Aureans, who she claims are the real despots of the universe."

Morrison blinked. "But how can that be? The Empire is trying to unite all humanity."

"United in the same chains, or so Alisa claims."

"But we have Kyreen, who has been our Defender. And we've decoded their logs..."

"Which portray only one side of the conflict," Abramson interrupted. "The Aurean side. You should know enough of Earth history to realize that each nation had its own propaganda, especially during wars. After a war was over, history was always rewritten by the winners."

"But... is the war imminent?" Morrison asked, a tinge of horror in his voice.

Abramson shook his head. "I don't know. I only know that we have been offered a different perspective on such a conflict, and an opportunity to build a different genetic legacy on our planet."

"How would she know about *that*?"

"I told her."

"*Told her?* You're awfully damned trusting. If the military finds out, you might be awfully damned something else."

"She's very persuasive. And she seems to be taking your part in this."

He paused while Morrison tried to absorb what he was saying.

"You see, this Enlightenment woman asked specifically for you. I thought I could put her off, but she seems pretty determined."

Interlude One

"Do you suppose any of them suspect that they've been set up?" Andre wondered.

"That their *world's* been set up?"

“It would have come out by now, but it hasn’t,” Alisa reassured him. “They have no way to suspect. They had no way of suspecting that the ‘Seeders’ here were anything but what they claimed. They never knew they were missing out on the Scalantran trade because they never knew about the Scalantrans.”

“They know now. As much as the recovered records told them.”

“Which wasn’t much. And of little interest to them, next to the supposed threat from us.”

“Us?” Andre protested. “We’re Kelsorians, after all. Except for Lillith.”

“Kelsor wouldn’t mean a thing to them. We’re the Enlightenment, as far as they’re concerned. We’ll have to continue operating on that basis.”

“We still don’t know why the Aureans never came back. Never ruled here as they did on the few other planets like Novo Recife they seeded. But it’s damned lucky that they haven’t.”

“*Rostran.*”

There was a catch in Alisa’s voice as she pronounced the word, a word that said it all. Had the Aureans but taken an alternate vector at Cygnias 275, they’d have found it – a world never meant to be found, a world of refugees from the Empire.

“It was dumb luck,” Andre said. That about summed it up. The fugitive Primes and Betas had found their haven only a few years after the Empire had found Westfold.

“And even dumber luck that they missed Rostran the second time.”

“Not to mention their ship crashing.”

“I don’t think we can count on a third round of luck, dumb or otherwise.”

“We’ll have to warn them,” Alisa said.

“And pray our warning does them any good, if they’re found out.”

“But for now, we have a situation *here*. We don’t know whether Kyreen is a ticking time bomb -- deeptaught for some purpose she is yet unaware of, but which could be triggered at any time.”

“We’d better not let Morrison get any inkling of that,” Andre remarked. “But I think you and Lillith will manage to distract him from any such line of thought.”

Chapter Two

Morrison's day passed with agonizing slowness. He read what information he had on the Enlightenment, but that only scared him all the more. Everything he read said they those Protectors were violent savages.

He couldn’t stand sitting around his office any longer, and it was too early for Mickey’s, so he called his valet at home and had him bring the cart around. Tearing around town would let off a good head of steam – from the cart and from himself. He put on his helmet and set off to the parking lot to meet Jeeves. Before long, they were off on a tear.



It calmed his ragged nerves, riding fast -- racing through the high street in mid-afternoon, practically challenging the runners to stop him and serve a warrant. But traffic today was light, and Jeeves knew how to drive safely and spot the police before they spotted him,

As always, riding made him feel keenly alive, part of the life around him. They took a run out of town, through field and forest, watching the harvester crews at work with their steam-powered threshers. Several hours later, after dusk, they headed back into town – and Mickey's.

As they approached the club, Morrison allowed his memories of Kyreen to intrude on his thoughts. He could still see her face and feel her body as they lay on that beach. She was a delicious mixture of femininity and otherworldly power, yet she'd proven to be so passionate and gentle in her loving.

Smiling, he realized that there was now one thing he liked more than riding fast. His moments with Kyreen.

Jeeves stopped beside Mickey's to let him off. Morrison advised him to wait for a call from the public box to pick him up, whenever. Combing his longish hair out with his fingers as he walked toward the front door, he heard the sound of an ostinato played on a kora, with drum accompaniment. African music was popular everywhere, even at a club like this where there were few brown faces to be seen.

. The crowd was no different than usual. A number of professors, most of them early thirties, and their wives and girlfriends. Also a handful of younger women. Grad students mostly. Out to complete their masters and get the kind of recommendations they needed for situations that would make them plump on the pocket. Based on the way several of the women were flirting, it was obvious that they believed there was more than one way to get a good recommendation.

He scanned the room a second time, but didn't see anyone who looked alien. He assumed the Enlightenment woman would be blonde -- something uncommon on Westfold. He walked through the crowded bar and out onto the back deck. The usual tennis matches were underway, mixed doubles battling it out as their friends roared encouragement at every point won. One of the women was blonde, but it didn't take long to decide that she was merely human. He was looking for someone with Kyreen's fitness level.

Merely? He smiled as he heard himself, realizing just how jaded he'd become. The players were all tall and beautiful and young. Some of them might turn pro. If not for his

intimacy with Kyreen, he would have been dazzled. He turned away to enter the last room of Mickey's.

Four billiards tables filled the space, a small bar occupying the far corner. Mickey's trademark Friday night entertainment, which in reality took hours to prepare for, was body painting. Two local artists were famous for their craft, and every Friday, they chose a willing volunteer, invariably a beautiful young woman, and they painted clothing on her. That paint was all she was allowed to wear in Mickey's.

A small group of people he hadn't seen before were gathered around one of the tables, and a dazzlingly tall blonde who was this week's canvas was leaning forward to make a shot, her body paint a very convincing version of a sports uniform. But he'd never heard of a football or cricket club called the Cubs? Who'd name a club after baby animals? Native animals at that, since only domestic animals had been brought here from Earth.

The paint imitated a shirt that was open to her waist and a tiny pair of red shorts that were, literally, skin tight. If he hadn't known better, he would have sworn she was wearing clothing, not just paint. She had an incredible figure, with large breasts that rode high and firm on her chest.



Despite her remarkable appearance, he immediately dismissed her as Alisa. He was convinced that Protectors would look violent and warlike, not cute. He was looking for a muscular blonde. Someone he knew was going to scare the shit out of him just from his first glance.

Still, he paused, unable to take his eyes from the painted woman. She looked outstandingly fit, although perhaps a little older than Kyreen. His heart leaped as he traced his eyes down the leanest and cutest legs he'd ever seen. Powerful muscles flexed beneath her tight skin as she leaned further over the table. He'd only seen one other woman with that degree of fitness. Kyreen.

The blonde grabbed a beer and settled into a corner with two short-haired neatly dressed men, giggling as one traced his fingers along the edges of her painted on clothing. No way they were students, Morrison decided. They looked vaguely military.

He scanned the rest of the room, and saw another blonde slouching against the blue wall at the back of the room, next to the Open sign. Her hair was unbrushed and windblown, and she was wearing a translucent shirt, the like of which was unfamiliar to him. His heart raced as he saw impossibly firm nipples tenting from beneath it. Despite her casual almost sloppy attire, he could see that she was just as remarkable a woman as the body-painting model.



She straightened up and retrieved her cue stick, and walked over to the billiards table. Leaning over the table, her hair falling over the felt, she took her shot: a three-banker around a group of balls in the center of the table that knocked two balls directly

into opposite pockets at the far end of the table. An impossible shot for anyone but a pro, and a very low percentage one even then.

The shooter stood back up, acting as if that had been a routine shot for her, twirling her hair in her fingers as she playfully challenged her companion to beat her shot. She was very tall; almost six feet, and her hair was slightly curled as it cascaded down her back nearly to her waist. Standing under the lights now, he saw that it was the most amazing blend of colors he'd ever seen—a mixture of a half dozen shades of gold. Her skin was flawlessly tanned, glowing like polished in the simulated sunlight.

Despite her casual attire, Morrison decided that she was the most desirable woman he'd ever laid eyes on. She was exuding an unconscious allure that permeated the air of the room.

Abramson's last words echoed in his mind: "There will be no mistaking her for merely human."

Was this Alisa? The deadly enemy of all humanity?

Ridiculous.

He pulled his eyes away from her to look around the room, only to find that his heart was really pounding. He saw the woman's partner staring back at him, while the body-painted blonde linked arms with her two companions and disappeared out the back door, heading toward the darkened surf.

The remaining man, seemingly in his early forties, turned to the shooter and whispered something. She turned to look Morrison's way, revealing the brightest, bluest eyes he'd ever seen. She promptly put down her cue and started to walk his way.

Morrison's mouth went dry and his heart beat funny as she approached.

"Dr. David Morrison, I presume?" she asked in a musically accented voice.

Her English was very good, although strangely accented. Moreover, her words sounded flat, lacking the local twang.

He swallowed hard, realizing that this almost certainly was the alien. A dangerous one?

"Alisa, I presume?" he asked, his voice surprisingly calm despite his inner turmoil.

"I'm Major Alisa Liddell." She nodded toward her partner. "And this is Captain Andre Kalik."

The older man held out his hand. Morrison took it, and found the man's handshake firm to the point of being punishing. He gratefully switched to Alisa's hand. Her skin was cool and very smooth, her fingers long, and her handshake gentle and feminine.

Morrison was suddenly embarrassed to feel his heat rising despite the tendrils of fear that still twisted his gut. He forced himself to look away from her, only to find the captain watching his reactions, a look of amusement on his face. It embarrassed him further to realize that he was amusing himself by observing his reaction to the blonde.

Morrison closed his eyes for a moment as he tried to slow his racing emotions. When he opened them again, the analytical part of his brain had woken up again. He recalled that the men had all wore a similar cut of clothing. That and the alert way they'd been looking around the room confirmed his worst fears.

"You're military?" Morrison asked disappointedly.

"Not exactly," Alisa replied brightly as she reached up to tie her hair off into two crude ponytails. She pulled on a white jacket to cover her shoulders, but didn't button it up.

"Exploration Service. We're part of a ship's science staff."

"A ship? What kind of ship?"

"A starship," Captain Kalik offered softly.

Morrison smiled nervously, half considering for a moment that this was some kind of prank set up by Abramson. A lot of students were fans of crude stories and cruder kinos based on what little was actually known about the universe beyond Westfold. No doubt the people who actually lived out there would find them hilarious.

But no, Alisa couldn't be a prank. He thought of Kyreen again, then of the bizarrely-costumed and heavily made-up characters in the kinos. They were always portrayed as stupid and brutal. Only Alisa appeared to be both intelligent and graceful despite the expanse of blonde hair and her terrific figure. Hers was an intense beauty, almost angelic in its perfection, yet somehow athletic at the same time.

His heart caught in his throat. Enlightenment military? "So... ah... how did you guys get here anyway?" he forced himself to ask.

"Alisa did the flying," Kalik shrugged. "From where we hid the ship at least."

"You're a pilot?" Morrison asked her, admiring the incredible sharpness and clarity of her eyes. She could probably see like a hawk.

Kalik chuckled as he answered for her. "You could say that. Haven't you heard about Velorians?"

"Plenty. Hasn't everybody? But nothing I wanted to hear. Not until today, at least."

"Seems as if Velorians are just an outrageous myth here," Kalik said, apparently just to let Morrison know that *he* knew. "Something they read up in an Aurean database.

Partial entries apparently, but augmented by foolish imagination. They think people like Alisa are the enemy. Only they're not."

"We caught up on all that after we landed, but before we came out," Alisa added. "I came out to Dr. Abramson, at least. Who came out to you. And to us, *about* you. So let's not waste any more time. I understand from Dr. Abramson that you have carnal knowledge of an Aurean femme. A Tset'lar to be exact."

Morrison's heart fluttered as her luminous eyes drew him in even deeper. They were like windows to another world, a world of beauty and promise. Carnal knowledge. The strange choice of words brought him back to reality. He was suddenly worried about Kyreen. "I don't know what you think you heard, but..."

"You don't have to play games with me, Dr. Morrison. We know all about your work, and that of your associates. You are playing an extremely dangerous game, what with injecting Aurean DNA into your population. Especially trying to bear a child with a tset legacy. Surely you know the history of that damnable race?"

Morrison blinked. He suddenly realized that he *didn't* know.

"*What* damnable history?"

"They're *killing machines*," Alisa said. "Engineered for but one purpose. If you but knew what they're capable of, you'd be scared shitless."

Scared? Of Kyreen? That was absurd. She was being made the victim here. That was why he'd opposed Brigitte's project – that, and he had to admit, the way it had been done behind his back. But he wasn't about to admit that to these Velorians.

"I know only of the deprivations and violence of the Enlightenment, Major Liddell," he said as he sat in the chair opposite her. "The way they create chaos and anarchy, encouraging worlds to fragment into clans and fight each other."

The older officer sat down beside the woman as he listened. Morrison noticed that Kalik and Alisa wore identical silver rings on their left hands. Husband and wife?

"You can call me Alisa, and my husband, Andre," she said, confirming his glance. "He's also my Captain."

"Then why don't you contact the government..."

"We're not exactly here on official business," Alisa interrupted with a wave of her hand. "At least, none that we are authorized for."

Morrison swallowed hard, trying to take it all in. "Then it's David to you," he granted, finding to his surprise that his fears were gradually fading. This woman didn't seem to be hostile, however misinformed she might be. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that she and her husband had the bearing and speech patterns of scientists, not soldiers.

He daringly asked the only question he could think of: "So why are you people here? Why do you want to meet with me?"

She smiled beautifully.

"Because you are a geneticist who has been opposed to your planet's military work from the beginning. You believe in curing diseases, but you are close to the people who are causing all the problems."

Morrison nodded.

Alisa smiled softly. "And given that you are intimate with one of the most powerful superhumans – highers you call them -- in the universe, you are the only man who could understand what I'm about to offer you."

Morrison took a leap, connecting the dots. "So you're Velorian, and you are offering a different legacy to our world." It felt strange to use that word without feeling a good deal of trepidation.

"See. That wasn't so hard, was it?" Alisa beamed. "Yes, I am indeed a Velorian, although nothing like the ones in your kinos. Fortunately."

Morrison's head was reeling with the implications of his daring declaration, and her simple acknowledgement. "So... if that's all true, then you're here to put a stop to my associates' work, aren't you?"

"It isn't what we came here for. It wasn't our business. But now we're making it our business. Under the circumstances, we have to improvise."

A stab of fear sliced through his belly as he thought of Kyreen again. He licked his dry lips. "But what about Kyreen. Or her child?"

"I couldn't harm her however hard I tried, but she could kill me and my daughters without effort. It is we who are at risk here, David, not you or your world."

Daughters? The body-painted girl? "So what... why?"

"My associates plan to contaminate your DNA stocks, making them useless. Yet at the same time, we would like to support some adjustments to create a well-intentioned plan of protecting yourself against the Aureans. Living this far out on the Rim, you must remain independent, of both Empire and Enlightenment. I'd like to balance out your use of the Supremis genome."

"Supremis genome?" He'd never heard it called that before, and he didn't like the implication of the word. "But without the borrowed DNA, we can't enhance..."

"What you don't know is that Supremis genetic manipulation carries a big risk if done in a laboratory. A time-bomb was put into our DNA if it is manipulated the way you are. Kyreen's daughter will not be born unless I help you."

"Her baby will die?" Morrison asked breathlessly, the cold fear in his belly growing sharper. Despite his anger over the unauthorized use of his DNA, he'd found that he was increasingly thinking of Kyreen's baby as his own.

Alisa nodded. "Fortunately, we have recently found a way to ensure that an in-vitro fertilization doesn't trigger the bomb, although it's a difficult and expensive treatment."

"You can heal her?"

"I believe so. But after that, I'd like to offer you a different way to build a protective defense force. A more natural way."

"I don't understand. We believe that her child is already invulnerable, despite being just a fetus."

"That's why you are here. You... the reluctant researcher who abhors the military. The only person on Westfold I can trust with this knowledge. With this gift. And the only man who can deliver it where it's needed."

"Gift?"

"I can make you capable of passing on Velorian genetics. First to your child. Then to others."

Morrison's jaw dropped. His head was really spinning now. "How is that supposed to work?" He glanced at her husband and then at the other men. "Everyone knows that you can't change a person's DNA after the moment of conception."

She just smiled. "Not true. Didn't you find some references in your Aurean logs to Enhancement? Transforming one's body from head to toe?"

Morrison stared at her, then at the scowl on Kalik's face. His mind raced, recalling some speculations that the scientific community had quickly dismissed. A single, partially corrupted reference in the logs had talked of a retrovirus. Such viruses were his stock in trade, delivering DNA from one cell to another.

But not on the scale Alisa suggested. "You can't systemically change a person's DNA, all their cells... that would be fatal!"

"There is a chance of that, I won't deny it," Alisa nodded, her golden tresses flying. "But I do have some experience in this area." She glanced at her husband, then back at Morrison. "And we have your tset'lar, who you have been sleeping with."

She paused to smile at him. "I'm fairly sure that you're the only living man in the universe able to make such a claim." Her smile grew coy. "I will say, you were amazing on that beach the other day. There are some things we Vels know about, and..."

Morrison just gaped at her. "That island was deserted!"

"Not from eight miles up it wasn't."

Morrison swallowed hard, remembering his enthusiasm that day, yet strangely not feeling embarrassed that this Velorian knew his secrets. That she's watched them.

"Kyreen should come and help ensure that the moment of passing the virus will at least be safe. Fortunately, she is an innocent, or neither of us could survive this."

Alisa slipped her hand into her pocket, and returned with a strange device. She handed it to Morrison. "It's a mini-computer," she explained. "Nothing like yours, but it's easy to use. Just push the red On button on the left, and read off the screen. The black button on the right will get you through the text. It contains most of what is published about my people. It also contains the location of our landing ship. Meet me there at dawn tomorrow."

With that, she rose to slip her arm around her husband's waist, and they returned to the table to continue their billiards game.

Chapter Three

Morrison was lost in a daze as he walked out of Mickey's. Alisa's words were echoing in his brain. He almost forgot to call Jeeves to bring the cart around.

"Only living man in the universe to be able to make such a claim."

The idea was preposterous, but intensely flattering. To think that he was the only man anywhere to be making love with such a goddess...

Yet it was also troubling. Kyreen a threat to even Alisa and her family? And what if it were Kyreen's kind and not Alisa's that posed a threat to Westfold itself? It was the Velorians' word against the Aureans' now. How was he to judge the truth of the matter? How was anyone? And yet he trusted Alisa...

Morrison was shaking as he boarded the cart, hardly even greeting Jeeves. He wasn't sure if it was the memory of Alisa or something in the air, maybe her daughter's painted nudity. Every one of his senses was tingling wonderfully; leaving him feeling like he was sixteen again, and he had a date arranged with this impossibly beautiful girl.

A date he was supposed to bring his girlfriend on?

But he also shivered at the thought of what it might portend for Westfold, let alone his relationship with Kyreen. Was she really his girlfriend? Mother of his child, for sure; but that was a strange role standing alone. Especially since he had neither asked for nor or consented to it..

So here he was, running the odds of knowing two such women, and having been intimate with one. One in a trillion at least. Yet if his guess about the discussion they'd just had was correct, he was being invited to be intimate with the other as well.

A trillion times a trillion?

No, something far more than mere chance was at work here. And he wasn't sure he liked it.

He thought of Kyreen again. He felt a bond with her, and their last weekend had been fantastic. But if not for the baby, perhaps she wouldn't be interested in him. With all the gold she wore, he knew she'd been working to keep him safe as they made love. Yet, despite his dreams of her being his lover, even his wife, of raising a child together, reality told him she would be his only for a short while.

But if what Alisa had alluded was true, enhancement, that could change. He was going to become a man who could give her children? Outside the lab? He shivered with excitement. There was only one way to do that.

Another thought sobered him. Would they be Aurean, Velorian, or something entirely different? Which side would they be on? Would they defend Westfold against the Aureans or the Velorians or both?

He paused to consider the degree of enhancement necessary to impregnate her naturally. He'd seen the data from Kyreen's empowered physical exams, and realized he would have to be hundreds of times more vital. Possibly thousands. His sperm would have to be as well.

He scoffed at that fantasy. He was a geneticist, and with any science he knew, one couldn't manipulate DNA for the purpose of changing the basic structure of a person's body, bones, muscles, and ligaments. Nor any organs. That could only occur prior to or during the act of conception. Altering a disease-causing defect was possible after, that was his life's work after all, but beyond that, a person's base DNA could only be damaged, but never improved. With any science he knew.

He was lost in that thought as Jeeves brought the cart to a slow stop outside the hostel that housed Kyreen's apartment. He'd been there once before. She had a student loft looking over the New Thames, the interior brightly lit with colored lights and filled with sound recording equipment.

She was trying to record some songs in her spare time, hoping to add one more skill to her already impressive resume. World Defender, brilliant medical student and perhaps a singer. Accomplishments that no one else would be capable of.

“Will you still be needing me again tonight?” his valet inquired.

“I expect not, Jeeves.”

“Very well, sir. I shall return in the morning.”

“That won't be necessary. I have another engagement.”

There wasn't a trace of embarrassment in the exchange. Jeeves was a man of the world, but discreet about it.

Kyreen, too was discreet. That was one of the reasons she lived in the loft, rather than on one of the lower floors. The other reason was that ordinary people didn't care for the long climb up the stairs, which was a short flight for her. Sometimes she didn't bother with the stairs but flew in the window. But not that often; she didn't like to attract attention,

Morrison pushed the buzzer by the front door. She answered quickly.

"Ky... this is David. Can I come up?"

She paused for a long moment, and then said, "Sure."

The door lock buzzed.

Morrison began climbing the dozen flights to her apartment. An old building; none of these fancy things called lifts. He was huffing and puffing before he was halfway there. He was breathing very hard by the time he finished the last set of stairs. Being in shape was one thing, but racing up a dozen flights of stairs was another.

Her door was ajar, so he slipped through. Kyreen was kneeling in the middle of the room, her head turned his way. She was dressed in a black breastband and tiny bottom. Significantly, she wasn't wearing any gold, and top stretched tightly over her impossibly firm breasts.



Her skin was a delicious chocolate brown as always, her eyes a dark, luminous blue. Her body was so slender and so perfect that it was hard to remember that she had thousands of times his strength. Or that she was bulletproof, not to mention fireproof. That was both scary and exciting -- the more so now that he knew she was the most powerful being in the universe. She could kill even a Velorian Protector – and yet she had offered herself to him, body and soul.

He tore his eyes away long enough to see that she'd been working on her music. There was a kora, the 21-string cross between a harp and a lute that had been brought to Westfold by the West Africa settlers who shared her color if not her ancestry. It was a difficult instrument to master.

"So what's going on, Dr. Morrison?" she asked.

Suddenly, his heart sank. Her formal use of his title and last name made Morrison fear he wasn't exactly welcome. He'd heard her talk about her problems with obsessive and possessive men. She was beyond possession.

"What do you know about Velorians, Ky?"

"You mean the flying blondes in kinos? The ones who could punch out a Prime while looking like some kind of angel?" She laughed. "Just some silly fantasies."

"What if I told you they were real?"

She slowly rose to sit on the metal table behind her. "Then I guess I'd be worried. They were mentioned in the Aurean logs as having the power to match or even beat a Prime." She shrugged. "But I suspect I could take one."

"And here I thought you were a modest girl," Morrison quipped.

"I've compared my strength to what was described in the logs for a Prime," she said with a tilt of her head. "I've got many times the strength of a typical Prime. Since reading that, I've decided I don't have to be modest all the time."

"Right," Morrison smiled. "But it is one of you more endearing qualities."

"So what about this Velorian person?"

"One of them is here on Westfold and she wants to meet you. At dawn tomorrow. Something about a genetic defect in your..." he caught himself, "in our baby's makeup."

Kyreen suddenly looked worried. "What?"

"How are you feeling?" Morrison asked.

"A few hot flashes," she shrugged.

"You ever felt them before? Or ever felt any discomfort?"

"I've never been pregnant before. But normal women have all kinds of hormone swings during early pregnancy. Why shouldn't I?"

"Because you aren't normal. I'm betting this is the start of the problem that Alisa mentioned?"

"Alisa?"

"The Velorian."

"Right." Kyreen fell silent, but she looked even more worried now.

"I suspect she was referring to some kind of devolution," Morrison continued.

"Maybe an unwinding of the child's DNA. It's the kind of defect I'd build into illicit DNA if I could."

Floating upward before folding her long legs in mid-air, Kyreen settled weightlessly on the couch. "Assuming I accept all this, how do we know she's telling the truth? She's supposed to be the enemy of my people."

"I don't think she's going to hurt you. In fact, she said you could easily kill her if you got into a fight."

"She *said* that!"

"I really think she's here to help, Ky. That she's for real. I had a good feeling about her and the men with her. She even brought her daughter to the meeting."

"And what, did she fly around or something?"

Morrison shook his head. "I could see it in her eyes. And her body. She was as utterly perfect as you."

"Utterly perfect, huh?" Kyreen smiled. "You always were a sweet talker." She lifted off the couch to float closer to him, lowering her legs until her feet touched the floor. Her height matched his own 6'2. "Dawn comes very early this time of year. You sure you want to go all the way home and then back here by then?"

Morrison felt his heart race at the suggestion in her words, which wasn't helped by the fact that he could still feel her body against his as they lay on that sandy beach. Or the sudden flowery sweetness of her perfume. He thought of her wearing gold again so soon, and decided it probably wasn't a good idea, what with being at this early stage of her pregnancy.

"We've got to get ready for the meeting, Ky. I don't even know where her ship is, and we need to understand what we're getting into."

He pulled out the device Alisa had given him.

“She put the location on here,” Morrison said. “Along with a lot of other stuff, I gather. We’ve got some studying to do.”

“As long as you promise to keep me warm tonight,” she purred. “But I have to believe your story now – I’ve never seen anything like that.”

He pushed the red button.

Interlude Two

“It’s a remarkable coincidence that Morrison’s a latent,” Andre said.

“We’d have had a devil of a time finding another candidate,” Alisa observed. “We don’t have time to hang around bars with scanners and trust to luck. And we’d be too conspicuous anywhere else. But to get *this* lucky?”

“It’s strange that Morrison hadn’t had any serious relationships before Kyreen. He’s 35 years old, after all.”

“Could she have somehow imprinted him?” Alisa wondered. “After all, he was the one who dug her out. Or helped her dig herself out of the crash.”

“It’s a good thing we had the field research team do our homework for us before we made our approach. Details matter.”

“But we also have to consider the possibility that *Kyreen* was the one imprinted Morrison was the first man she saw on this planet.”

“Only, if this is something out of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, who was Puck?”

“Maybe there doesn’t have to be a Puck,” Alisa ventured. “Kyreen may have been engineered to respond to latents and enhance them herself. Enhance them beyond any

measure ever known before – reproducing her own kind, male and female, a new breed of Tset'lars, possibly immune to the plague by virtue of Tanzrobian genes.”

“Skietra! Only, she doesn't know that. And she'd better not find out. Morrison had better not find out, either. We could have a disaster on our hands, on the hands of the entire civilized universe.

Chapter Four

David and Kyreen were sitting side by side on the couch two hours later, neither of them daring to breathe.

They'd just watched the compact history of the Supremis race, detailing the Velorian and Aurean sub-races, along with their social and political structures. They'd all learned about the reach of the Empire and the desperate battle by the Enlightenment.

"Her story is like my ship's logs, but reversed," Kyreen finally said. "And they are afraid, very afraid of people like me! Tset'lars they call us."

Morrison was equally fascinated. "Abramson warned me about this. How warring cultures have their own propaganda, how they rationalize and edit their histories."

Kyreen let her breath out with a whoosh. "Well, we got two higher-races who are trying to wipe each other out, with you humans caught in the middle. And I'm supposed to be some sort of bloody assassin. Dark skin and on the dark side.”

"No, it can't be that simple, Ky. Black and white, good and bad. This is just another flavor of propaganda."

Kyreen shrugged. "Who the hell knows?"

"What I do know is that Alisa talked about fixing some DNA problem. A time bomb. A flaw that's already in our baby." He paused, hating himself for what he was about to say. "She even wants to help us create an army to oppose the Aureans before they come back."

"What about the Enlightenment?" Kyreen asked. "Are they our enemy as well?"

"No idea. But I don't think she'd be helping us in that case. She claims that she wants to keep us neutral but free."

"By building an army of people with half Velorian, half Tset'lar genetics? Created to fight all other Supremis? Is that what she's proposing?"

"We don't know where the truth lies," Morrison shook his head, hardly believing he was involved in the same kind of project he'd always opposed. He walked up behind Kyreen to rest his hands on her shoulders. Without her gold, her body felt like it was carved from a solid block of steel.

"All we know is that powerful people are out there. And compared to you, everyone else here is very, very weak." He paused, his thoughts racing as he felt his spirits rising. "But we're still human. Inside at least. And we still have free choice."

"Spoken like a true human," Kyreen said despondently.

"Yes. Ordinary humans and enhanced-humans, but all very human at the core. Especially you."

She lifted her hands to hold his, and turned to look into his eyes. "She really said I was capable of killing her? That seems incredible after what we just saw."

Morrison nodded. "Indeed."

"Then I guess we've nothing to fear from the likes of her. If she acts up, I'll paste her good and proper, I'll give her a belly full and our baby will be happy forever more."

"I don't think that's what she has in mind, Ky. She was serious about helping us. She's taking a risk to do it. The risk that you'll destroy them."

Kyreen turned in his arms to gently kiss him. "Am I really that dangerous?" she whispered. "Maybe I can put on just a little gold, David. I want to hold you close tonight."

Morrison's heart leaped. He remembered the strength of her wild lovemaking while wearing all her gold: belly chain, heavy necklace and bracelets. She'd been a tiger on that beach, the warm waves washing over the two of them; she was so demanding yet so infinitely appreciate of his manly skills as he took her, crying out in sweet pleasure. Far stronger than him even then, she was orders of magnitude stronger than that now.

Losing himself in that thought, an unbidden but disturbing memory flashed through his mind. He tried to push it away, to lose himself in her loving, but he couldn't escape the images from a very illicit kino he'd once seen.

It had come from a technician who'd been asked to replicate it. Concerned by what he'd found, he had come to Morrison, clearly disturbed. Morrison had threaded the kino into the projector used for educational films, only to find himself watching a young Kyreen folding the bar of a dumbbell. She was bending the nearly inch-thick steel in her slender hands like it was soft tree sap. She couldn't have been more than thirteen or fourteen, but her strength had been mind-boggling from at a very young age.

She continued to shape the folded steel bar as the camera focused on her hands, essentially pressure welding it into a solid bar two inches thick and eight inches long, all to the ribald laughs and encouragement of two other women. The audio quality was too

poor for Morrison to make out the voices, but what he'd seen on the video had changed his perspective on Brigitte's research forever more.

Once Kyreen had formed her “toy,” the women had encouraged her to insert it into herself. She was clearly reluctant, but he could make out someone saying “high girl, high and mighty,” and laughing, but nothing more. Unable to tear his eyes from the video, he'd watched in horrified fascination as Kyreen did as the harpies bid, taking it into herself, all of it, then bearing down with her inner strength. She closed her slender legs tightly, a teenager's abdominal muscles tensing into a hard grid.

Within seconds, a brilliant inner glow lit her sex, and a minute after that, rivulets of white-hot liquid began to run down her inner thighs Morrison remembered how he'd gasped in shock as she melted the steel inside herself, the heat coming from pure compression. He'd at once been aroused by the demonstration of her invulnerability and ashamed of himself for it – given the circumstances.

He'd promptly destroyed the kino and sworn the technician to secrecy. And while he couldn't prove it, he suspected Brigitte's twisted sisterhood had been amusing themselves with their young “high girl.” Taking advantage of an innocent and naive girl.

He felt himself go stiff in the face as well as the cock.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Don't be afraid. You are the only man who will ever laal with me. The father of my baby. I would never hurt you."

"Ky, we really shouldn't..."

But his expression said otherwise.

She smiled at the excitement in his eyes as she lifted the long gold chain from the table beside her, and fastened it around her slender waist. She shrugged out of her top, revealing her most perfect of breasts, and lifted his hands to place them on them.

Not carved steel any longer, but living steel, feeling silken against his palms. But silken steel, still – steel that he could dent slightly with his fingers, but that sprang back the moment he effaced the pressure. Nipples that became steel bullets at his caress. That she was completely invulnerable but so eagerly responsive...

"I've been practicing. You know, so we can do it with only the belly chain."

Kyreen rose before him; with only the chain, she could levitate just enough to thrill him all the more.

Her fingers fumbled with his pants now, opening him, her warm fingers encircling his hardness as he became all the man he could be. She slowly guided him backward, one arm behind his back, the other holding him so intimately, her feet never touching the floor as she lowered him gently onto his back.

She reached up long enough to tear the rest of her clothing away; she was so wet, so ready. He held her breasts tightly as she straddled him, marveling at her fullness, his hands overfilled, his cock pressing against her lower abs. She smiled at the excitement in his eyes as she rose to guide herself to him, testing his human flesh at its hardest against her inviting flesh.

She took him slowly, gently, like a virgin, a half-inch at a time, her slippery tightness finally swallowing him with her deep luxurious warmth. She began to ride him, using the feathery touch of her powerful muscles, floating upward until he was about to slip free, then falling over him, taking him deeper yet, holding him at the bottom of each stroke

more tightly than any human woman could, both of them very aware that she still had a hundred times his strength.

Morrison abandoned himself to his passion, guiding her with his hands on her breasts, her body moving so weightlessly. He thrust upward as hard as he could to meet her descent, moving harder, faster, forgetting those earlier images, desiring only to bring her pleasure.

Her eyes were glowing with blue warmth when she smiled, her hair floating in the air, her kisses hungrily finding his lips, her body moving faster and faster, taking him right to edge. He started to groan with accustomed release, but she paused with him full inside her, holding him tighter yet, delaying him, forcing the pressure within his body. He tore at her like a savage beast, trying to thrust harder against her, yet unable to move as she used her supreme strength to hold him. He grew more frantic, his orgasm like a tsunami wave that had been frozen as it approached a shoreline.

She finally relented, and he cried out savagely as he rolled her over to finish like a man. He thrust himself as hard as he could into her, slamming her head against the wall as her long legs wrapped around him, her heels pressing into his ass to give him even greater strength. He slammed himself against her with all his strength, reveling in the knowledge that he couldn't harm her, and finally came with a hoarse but ecstatic shout of wondrous relief, his seed filling her as she softened herself inside and let it all come.

Exhausted, he collapsed on top of her, thrilling to the wash of pleasure from the most incredible sex of his life. Strangely, beyond even the wonderful glow of fulfillment, he felt like a victorious warrior after a battle.

Kyreen rolled over on her side, and he spooned up behind her. His ardor quickly returned. No words were exchanged, only sighs of contentment as she opened her legs and shifted her pelvis, letting him slide between her still wet nether lips. She held him gently inside her as she moved slowly, encouraging him to pleasure them both gently. He nuzzled her ear this time, gently biting her earlobe as he began moving faster, harder, focusing his efforts on bringing her comfort.

A tremendous weight seemed to lift from Kyreen's heart after he came again, soft and gentle this time. He was no longer afraid of her strength. Happy at that, they both drifted off into sleep as their loving faded into their separate happy dreams.

Chapter Five

Morrison awoke before dawn to see Kyreen floating in the middle of the room, her eyes glowing an eerie blue. Her gold had disappeared again, and she was staring at the blank wall beside her.

"I can't find their ship," she said. "Yet according to that map, it's less than ninety miles away."

"You can see that far?" Morrison asked, clearly surprised. He followed her gaze, only to have his end at the weathered brick that made up the north side of her loft.

"Plus through the wall?"

"Usually. But something's blocking my sight this morning."

She blinked her eyes back to normal vision and floated down to straddle him on the bed, smiling playfully. "Maybe all your seed inside me has made me a bit more human this morning."

It was a bad joke, and absurd on the face of it. But Morrison broke into a smile just the same.

"You were incredible, Ky. Even with all that much of your strength..."

"Told you I've been practicing. I loved the way you felt inside me, without the dulling tingles from wearing all my gold. So different."

"We could always put in some more practice," he suggested.

She quickly rose from the bed to float over him, her cunt only inches from his face, driving him crazy with her musky sweetness. Morrison reached up to hold her smooth legs, trying to pull her closer, only to find himself lifted off the bed as she rose further. She wrapped her arms around him to lift him into the air, the two of them landing softly on the rug beside the bed.

But suddenly she was all seriousness.

"We've got to fly soon," she said. "We don't have a lot of time if we're going to get to that ship by dawn."

Kyreen had taken him on short hops before. But that had been in broad daylight. It had been fun, but also disorienting. Seeing the campus, seeing the whole area from a mile up... It made him dizzy. Worse than dizzy if they stayed up too long.

Flight was uncommon on Westfold. There were hydrogen balloons, but he'd never ridden one. They were impractical for travel, being at the mercy of the winds. There had been attempts before Kyreen's arrival at developing steam-powered aircraft, but that whole approach had turned out to be a dead-end. And weapons, rather than delivery systems, had absorbed most of the research and development resources of the planet over the past 15 years...

But now, fly they must. There was time only to clean up before they left. She took his hand and led him toward the oversized shower in her bathroom. They took turns washing each other, barely escaping the renewed wave of passion that gripped them both.

Kyreen finally slapped him hard on the butt as she slipped from his arms, leaving him standing with his cock erect in the warm water. She quickly dried herself and began to dress.

Morrison followed, finding his lingering ardor made it difficult to get dressed at first. But he managed; moments later they were racing through the pre-dawn mist, Kyreen cradling him in her arms. It was a rush in more ways than one -- the wind buffeting against him, uncomfortable, but thrilling just the same; and the closeness of her body as she sailed through the air with the greatest of ease.

They headed into the forested, mountainous region north of Smythville, the home of college. It was hard for him to make out any details on the ground, which might have been just as well, given his acrophobia; but Kyreen had memorized the map and had the advantage of perfect night vision. It was just beginning to get light when they reached the designated coordinates.

Morrison could see nothing but a lonely clearing between two small hillocks. But Kyreen's eyes were drawn to a huge mound of leaves and branches next to a small pond.

"It's under there," she pointed.

She alighted next to the mound, and put Morrison down next to her. He was wobbly on his feet at first, and wobbly in the head, too -- not sure how one knocked on the door

of a hidden alien space ship, not even sure which end was which. He started walking around the mound, looking for some clue.

But then he was distracted by a swish in the air over his head. Glancing up, he saw a flicker of white, moving fast, darting from tree to tree, barely visible in the pre-dawn light. If not for the speed it moved at, he would have assumed it was a large, white bird. He knew it wasn't.

He looked back down, only to have that apparition float down to hover only a few feet in front of him. It was a young girl, no more than seven years old, long, blonde hair flying in the breeze. She was dressed in a vaporous, white gown that made her look like an angel.

"My mother said you'd be coming," the girl said softly.

Morrison recognized the same foreign accent he'd heard in Mickey's bar.

The girl turned to look at Kyreen. "Is that her? The Tset'lar?"

Morrison swallowed hard. He hadn't expected this. "Her name is Kyreen, and she's my friend."

"She's going to have a baby, isn't she?"

"Yes. My baby."

"Good," the girl said with simple satisfaction. "It gets lonely being around Terrans all the time. I hope she likes to fly." With those words still hanging in the air, she leaped from the ground, heading directly toward the glow of the rising sun. In seconds, she was gone.

Morrison looked back at Kyreen, only to see her blue eyes glowing larger than normal. "What a beautiful little girl," he exclaimed.

"A Velorinna," Kyreen guessed correctly.

Feeling as if he was lost in a dream, Morrison resumed his circuit of the mound. He was almost back at his starting point when the leaves begin to fly upward in front of him. A shaft of white light emerged, and then a much taller blonde floated out the opening to hover in mid-air. She also looked like an angel in the pre-dawn darkness, the same kind of vaporous white gown floating around her, her hair wet. It was the young blonde from Mickey's, minus the body paint. He guessed she was 17 or 18.

She crossed her arms under her breasts and floated toward Kyreen, the two superwomen staring somewhat warily at each other. Morrison saw the blonde shiver slightly as she stared into Kyreen's oversized eyes.

"So I finally meet a Tset'lar," she said softly.

Kyreen returned her gaze, her eyes glowing even brighter. "So I've been told. I'll have to take your word for it, having been out of contact with my own people."

"Which is why I'm still alive," the blonde said, but extended her hand.

Kyreen hesitated a moment.

"I'm sorry I didn't introduce myself earlier. My name is Ensign Lillith Liddell. You just met my little sister, Trina."

The fact that he was dealing with a family of Velorians strangely made Morrison more comfortable. "That body-paint was insanely cute," he said lamely. "I had no idea at first that it was just paint."

Lillith smiled as she took Kyreen's hand in hers. "The artist was more modest. He credited the canvas for his good work. Inspiration he claimed. But my friends and I were just having fun."

Morrison noticed the sudden display of hard tendons across both women's wrists as they shook hands. It didn't take a detective to see a hint of pain appear in Lillith's eyes a moment later.

"So you are as strong as your reputation," Lillith said, pulling her hand back to massage it.

That's when Morrison became aware of another woman. The Major. Alisa was also dressed in the same sort of flowing white gown as she floated in the air just behind her daughter.

"And an innocent as well," Alisa said softly. "How fascinating."

"Innocent?" Kyreen repeated, sounding insulted.

Morrison gawked at the way the women's eyes glowed in the dark. Alisa and her daughter's blonde hair reflected the last bit of cool moonlight, while Kyreen's brown skin caught the first warmth of sunrise as she floated higher in the clearing. They were all incredibly beautiful, yet he tried to sense any tension in the air. If he'd learned anything from the Velorian's data card, it was that these warriors were ordinarily deadly enemies.

But warriors by nature or nurture? he wondered.

That worry was overwhelmed by a sense of being completely and totally out of place standing between these women. Like a wandering mortal standing before warring goddesses, his heart leapt as he remembered that he was the sole reason they were here.

He suddenly felt very inadequate to that task. Whatever it was.

He hadn't a reason to worry, as Alisa held her hand out to Kyreen, who hesitated only briefly before taking it. Without another word, Alisa led the way toward the lighted

opening of the ship, and the two wonder women floated down into the hole in the leaf pile. Lillith winked at Morrison and then performed an acrobatic backflip in mid-air to follow them.

Suddenly feeling very alone, Morrison shuddered as he looked around at the pre-dawn coolness, looking for the young girl. He saw only the lightening sky. Overhead, migrating birds filled the air with their sad songs of the coming Barren season. Yet a sudden memory made the turn of the season an occasion for joy rather than sorrow.

It had been on the eve of Barren three years ago that Kyreen had seduced him. She hadn't been his own student yet, only the subject – or victim – of Brigitte's research project. She had had little formal education, and yet she had learned so much on her own that she was later granted special dispensation to enter the college as a first former.



Morrison had been teaching a first-year chemistry class that day – substituting for an ailing fellow don – and had held taken the lecture outside, for it was a fine clear day and unseasonably warm. He had just dismissed the class and was packing up his test tubes when she appeared before him, like a dream suddenly become reality.

“Would you like to laal with me?” she’d asked. Just like that.

She was dressed quite modestly at the time, in keeping with custom. Yet custom on Westfold was deceiving. The British who had been settled here came from a time of

relaxed mores – the era of Restoration comedy and even *Fanny Hill*. With traditional religious beliefs shattered by the collective experience of abduction, they took a more pragmatic view of morality – including sex. Anything went, as long as nobody was hurt.

The West Africans were actually more conservative, on the whole. But they loved to laal, as they put it -- a coincidental parallel to the English loll. Even so, neither they nor the British were usually so bold as to make propositions out of the blue.

“But it’s not out of the blue,” Kyreen had explained when he pointed that out. “You were the first man I ever saw here, digging me out of the crash. I taught you how to read the archives. And I’ve seen you lots of times since then – at that military demonstration, at Brigitte’s lab. You don’t seem to have a girl, even though you’re quite handsome, and I’ve already done it with women, besides playing with myself since I was a child, and I can see the look on your face and I know you’d love to fuck me.”

Would he! It wasn’t long before they were back at his quarters, and she stripped off her dress to reveal that there was nothing underneath but gold – no stays (Not that she needed them!), no petticoats. Her rich brown flesh was completely flawless, but for a patch that looked like a tattoo but couldn’t be – some sort of Imperial symbol, perhaps. She was so incredibly beautiful that he embarrassed himself by coming in his pants.

Kyreen wasn’t the least embarrassed. “I’m dripping too,” she teased, and indeed he could see the juices running down her legs. He couldn’t stand it; pulling down his pants, he didn’t even bother removing his shirt and other garments before begging her to lie down. He took her savagely then, thinking of nothing but his cock in her cunt, making only the most rudimentary caresses. The most incredible thing, although he didn’t give it any thought at the time, was that she came with him.

Morrison had feared afterwards that she'd been faking, that he'd blown it. But she wanted to go another round, and another. He'd learned something about her physiology since then, and also learned to be a better lover to her. And yet there were recurring moments of doubt. Could she *really* love him that much? There were surely other men as good or better. Or was that just an excuse, especially now that he was tempted by these Velorians -- as alluring in their own way as Kyreen?

Now the moment of truth might be at hand. As he walked closer to the opening, only to find the ship's inner light so bright that it hurt his eyes. He shielded them with his hand as he slow walked down a half dozen metal steps and through a complex airlock. Inside, a white corridor stretched a hundred feet forward to end at a round hatch.

He wiped his tears away and walked gingerly down the passageway, feeling as if he had just been transported into some fantastic kino – the kind that involved imagined nasty Velorians or nastier monsters from other worlds. He reached the hatch at the end of the corridor, and it whooshed open in front of him, revealing the ship's bridge.

The man he recalled had introduced himself as Captain Andre Kalik looked up from his work. He was leaning over some sort of transparent table, filled with shifting images of stars and planets – none of which he recognized, any more than he could fathom where the images came from.

"Do you have any idea why you're here?" Kalik asked without greeting. His voice had a clipped edge to it, as if he was suppressing an angry emotion.

"Good morning to you, too," Morrison replied, restraining his sarcasm as best he could. He sat down in one of the large contoured crew chairs to look around further. The

equipment in the bridge looked impossibly advanced compared to anything he'd seen on Westfold.

"So, do you?" Kalik asked again.

Morrison didn't answer as he studied a screen that showed a view of Westfold from space. Finally something he recognized, if only from the coastline of the Midland on the Eastern Sea. The terminator of day and night was creeping across the center screen. He slowly turned back to meet the Captain's eyes.

"I think your wife is going to do something to me. To Kyreen perhaps as well. Something to stabilize our child's DNA."

Kalik laughed mirthlessly as he walked closer, sitting in a chair across from Morrison. "Stabilize, huh?"

"I don't know the correct term."

"It's called enhancement, Dr. Morrison, and it's dangerous as hell."

"So why tell me that now? You were both recruiting me pretty hard in that bar."

Kalik studied his hands for a moment, and then looked back up at him. "Alisa is determined that Westfold can play a role in holding back the reach of the Empire in this quadrant." He paused for a long moment. "And you harbor one of only two Tset'lars we know are still living. The other is an ally of ours. She lives on a planet named Rostran."

Morrison shook his head. "Never heard of it."

"You haven't heard of *any* other worlds. Except Aurea and Velor, of course. As for Rostran, hardly anyone anywhere has heard of it and, frankly, we'd like to keep things that way. It's not in this quadrant, anyway. Perhaps not even in this continuum."

"You travel in time, not just in space?"

"Not deliberately. We were exploring some phenomena in this wormhole, Cygnias 275, and we seemed to take a wrong turn, so to speak. If not for Alisa and Lillith being outside the ship at the time, we would have been torn apart. They quickly pushed us down this parallel arm of the wormhole."

"Parallel arms? Wormholes?" Morrison asked, clearly confused.

"Think of it as a jump matrix that branches off perpendicular to the wormhole's main axis. But inside, the effects of distance and space are congruently replaced by temporal effects."

"And that lets you travel in time?"

"Or through alternate continuums. We aren't sure how to define it yet. All I know is that none of the stars here match anything in our databases. And that yours is the first populated planet we've found."

"You're lost?" Morrison asked incredulously.

"Not exactly," Kalik said through clenched teeth. "We just haven't found ourselves yet."

Morrison smiled at the man's bravado. "Sounds like lost to me."

"We know where we came out of the parallel arm," Kalik said. "I'm confident that we can find our way back. The real question is how the Aureans managed to find this world. And, for that matter, how it came to be settled in the first place."

"The Seeders—"

"Yes, the Seeders. They've established human colonies on thousands of worlds. But they've never simply abandoned them. After nurturing the first generation, they've

invariably opened these brave new worlds to interstellar commerce by bringing in the Scalantrans.”

“Scalantrans?”

“You’ve never encountered them. You’ve never even heard of them. That in itself is suspicious. And it raises suspicions about the Seeders. *Your* Seeders, at any rate. What did they look like?”

“Like... like people. Only with strange accents. Or so it was told.”

“They always do look like ordinary people, and in recently centuries they generally have been. Before that, the Galen and the Protos – the perscomp told you about them. But then the Aureans, most of them, also look like ordinary people. Do you see what I’m driving at?”

“The Aureans... brought us here?”

“The real question is: *why?* It wasn’t a matter of simple imperialism, or they’d have stuck around. And yet the fact that they sent another ship two centuries later indicates that they didn’t simply lose track of Westfold. Your planet is hard to find, yet their ship found it – because the Empire *already knew where it was*. It can’t have been sheer coincidence. And the fact that its mission was to bring a Tset’lar is beyond the remotest possibility of coincidence.”

“And that’s why you’ve taken a sudden interest in Westfold?”

"Initially it was just that yours was the first populated world we had found here. But when Alisa realized that you have a Tset'lar who doesn't know she is one--"

"You guys seem very worried about that."

"If you knew what I know, you'd be worried too," Kalik said darkly.

"Kyreen wouldn't hurt anyone."

Kalik laughed mirthlessly. "That's the most bizarre thing anyone has said about a Tset'lar. Skietra, her sisters have been known to sterilize entire planets. Tens of billions of humans have died as the result of Tset'lar attacks, thousands of Velorians too, yet there were only a few dozen Tset's ever born."

Morrison stared back at him, shocked by what he'd heard. "Billions? And only two live?"

"A plague wiped them out, released by the Galen. We're guessing it didn't reach your isolated world."

"Is that why our baby's genetics are unstable?"

Kalik shook his head. "No, that goes back even further. Controlling the reproduction of the Supremis has always been a Galen objective. They put in some safeguards."

"Well, it seems to me as if the threat is over now. With only two left, and Kyreen being peaceful. You said the other one was an ally."

"Three if we include your unborn daughter," Kalik said grimly. "Fortunately, the way you're reproducing won't work to bring your daughter to full-term."

Morrison swallowed hard, pushing back a growing fear. "Alisa said as much. Which is why I'm really here. To fix that."

"A bad idea, I think, keeping Tset'lar genetics alive. Even worse to create more. But Alisa is determined."

"Saving our baby is a bad idea?" Morrison exclaimed angrily. "What kind of monster are you, wishing death for a month old fetus?"

"Think of the lives it could save."

"This is bullshit," Morrison shouted, rising to his feet, his anger boiling over. "I didn't come here to have my girlfriend or my unborn daughter referred to as monsters."

"Your girlfriend?" Kalik smirked. "Tset'lars don't have friends. Only victims."

Morrison turned and walked toward the hatch. He nearly collided with it when it didn't open for him. He turned back to glare at Kalik. "Am I your prisoner now?"

Kalik pushed a button and the door swished open.

Morrison stalked through the opening to find himself alone in the long corridor again. One of the other men he'd seen in the bar came out of a doorway and nodded silently to him as he headed toward the Bridge. Morrison tried a half dozen doorways along the corridor, but none would open for him. He finally found one at the far end that seemed to use an old-fashioned handle, except it was made of incredibly heavy steel. He tried to turn it, but it seemed welded in place.

He was about to exit back out the hatch he'd entered through, when the young girl floated back down to hover in front of him. Not quite four feet tall, her shimmering blonde hair fell to her waist and her eyes were as clear and blue as polished glass, yet smaller than Kyreen's. Her skin was the most flawless shade of tan he'd ever seen, her vaporous white gown floating around her.

Trina, he remembered.

"You're supposed to go in there," she pointed to the door with the huge handle.

"I can't open it."

"Of course not," she said in the matter of fact way that young children do. "You're human." She floated over and easily twisted the handle 90 degrees counterclockwise. The door gave off a deep thud and creaked open. Turning her back to him, she floated

down until her bare feet landed on the floor, then glanced up to give him a strangely adult look. "Fortunately, I'm not."

Morrison watched her walk off to swish through one of the doors that had refused to admit him. Alone again, he turned his gaze back to the partially open armored hatch. It was dark inside, but with a flickering glow that looked like candlelight. Leaning against the door, he strained to open it enough to slip through.

The room was surprisingly large, much bigger than a hotel room, and the air was filled with flowing white silk banners that hung halfway to the floor. A hundred candles lit the floor, formed into elaborate patterns. The candles flickered softly as he slowly walked toward a raised platform in the middle of the room. The platform was surrounded by heavier drapes of red silk.

Reaching out to part the drapes, he was shocked to find Kyreen and Lillith kneeling in the middle of the platform, their bodies slick with sweat. The young women were kissing passionately, arms wrapped around each other, blonde and black hair intermingled, fragrant with sweat, their chocolate and tanned skin intermingling. They seemed unconscious of his presence. Kyreen was busy kissing her way down Lillith's body, pausing at her breasts. Lillith gave off a soft cry of pleasure.

Morrison felt like a voyeur, and his first instinct was to leave. Except that Trina had said he was supposed to be here. That bothered him enough as it was, but now that he was here, he was going to stay, especially after his adjusting eyes took in the fact that neither woman was wearing gold. Fascinated by that, he found he was incredibly turned on. Stepping back to hide in the banners of silk, he watched as Alisa appeared now, her body as naked as the others.

Lillith smiled up at her mother as she floated backward, opening her long legs. Kyreen's hands played skillfully over her inner thighs, her kisses following. Lillith leaned her head back as she floated on her back, her long hair spilling across the blue satin sheets. Guiding her hands to cup Lillith's buttocks, Kyreen's kisses moved higher, finding the beautiful, nude mound of Lillith's sex. She began to run the tip of her tongue gently along those intimate folds, opening Lillith so gently, enticing her body to awaken fully in the way of a Velorian.

That most feminine of organs obediently peaking upward between the tight folds, and Lillith cried out softly as Kyreen's tongue encircled her passion, her chest heaving as she gasped for air. Kyreen continued her seemingly delicate ministrations, playing Lillith's body like a fine instrument, skillfully taking her closer to her peak of passion.

Morrison suspected that nothing he was seeing was delicate in the least, not in human terms anyway. Still, he was fascinated by the girl-on-girl loving. Unlike that horrible film he'd seen before, this lovemaking was tender, gentle and caring. Beautiful. And like most men, he suddenly envisioned himself somehow joining in, pouring his wild passion in to the heady mixture of scents that filled the room.

That thought had no sooner crossed his mind than Kyreen slipped to the side, rotating her body in mid-air, spooning herself up beneath Lillith's back as if to support her levitation. Alisa floated closer and joined them, wrapping her long legs around her daughter's, pulling them backward as she opened them wider, entwining her arms in Kyreen's as well. She turned her head to smile at Morrison. "The rest is up to you, my new friend."

Morrison gulped air as he saw Lillith squirming, needful of being touched further, the word "please" escaping her moist lips. He was also very conscious of Kyreen and Alisa's eyes on him.

"I believe it's called 'tipping the velvet' on your world," Alisa said. "Kyreen has been most informative about such matters."

It all crashed in on him. Kyreen and Alisa restraining the fully empowered Velorian after Kyreen had taken her to the edge of orgasm. It was going to be his job to finish her! But clearly not in the way of a man, as Lillith wore no gold.

He felt as if he was floating on air himself as he walked closer, easing his body between the women's legs, kneeling down on the firm mattress. The warmth of Lillith's sex was but inches before his lips. He leaned forward, guiding his hands along Kyreen's powerful legs, then across Alisa's slender hips, finally closing his hands around the cuteness of Lillith's tight ass. He touched his tongue to the fragrant wonder of her wetness.

An avalanche of taste instantly enveloped him, like flowers and honey mixed with a hint of sexy musk. His body surged with desire as he tried to pick up where Kyreen had left off. Tracing his tongue slowly up Lillith's sex, he pursed his lips and pulled her tiny nub of passion inward, holding it gently with his teeth, swirling his tongue around it at the same time.

Lillith began to buck wildly, but the other women used their immense strength to hold her back. Morrison held Lillith's ass tighter as he gripped her passion with his teeth, knowing he couldn't hurt her, and attacked her with a passion he'd previously felt only in Kyreen's arms.

Bare seconds had passed before Lillith cried out and her body began to jerk even more wildly. He heard Alisa gasp as she strained to keep her daughter's legs opened, and Kyreen lent her greater strength to the effort, protecting him, holding back the Velorian's impassioned arms as well, anchoring Lillith's orgasming body into that tiny bit of space.

Lillith's cries of passion went on and on, as if she was caught in an endless peak of ecstasy. Morrison increased the fervor of his ministrations, hoping to earn her release, and then something remarkable happened. A single drop of glowing nectar appeared from the very tip of her clitoris. Without thinking, Morrison drew it into himself, just as Lillith cried out and went crazy beneath him.

A soft explosion of color erupted from behind his eyeballs, only to be washed away as a warm wave of white light enveloped him. Morrison stiffened and slumped to the floor, and the white wave was quickly replaced by a soft blanket of darkness.

He was unconscious seconds later when Alisa released Lillith, and Kyreen turned back to face her, their bodies rotating back upright in the mid-air, their deep kisses resuming as Kyreen's strong fingers replaced his loving tongue.

Alisa carried Morrison away, his body almost weightless in her arms. Lillith followed them down the hallway much later, after Kyreen had exhausted her. Kalik returned with Alisa to join Kyreen. He slowly undressed in front of the two women.

Alisa smiled at her husband, then at Kyreen. She knew the Tset'lar's passion was only beginning. As was her own.

Chapter Six

Kyreen awoke hours later. Smiling, she curled up in the satin sheets, feeling the warm glow inside her. Alisa had shared her husband's passion, and he'd proven to be as fantastically enhanced as Alisa had promised Morrison would become.

She'd never known that lovemaking could be that way with a man... somehow tender and athletic, almost violent, yet loving at the same time. Or perhaps it was the lovemaking without gold, a delicious treat that filled her body with wild pleasures that she could not even name. All she knew was that she loved it as he took her again and again, fucking her until they were both exhausted.

She rose to dress in the clothes she'd brought. She glanced through the walls to find Morrison, spasming from the effects of a painful illness. Kalik sat across the room, smiling back at her.

"Is he going to be okay?" she asked, worried.

"Quite," he replied. "Lillith and Trina are taking care of him. He'll probably be more vital than I am when he wakes up."

A delicious shiver raced through Kyreen's body at that thought. "That would be incredible. No, beyond incredible."

"So you enjoyed me?"

"Most certainly," Kyreen cooed, unable to resist smiling. "Any more where that came from?"

His smile brightened as he rose. "Alisa permits me a few discretions. But not all. As I do her." He laughed softly. "She is Velorian, after all."



Kyreen guessed what he meant by that, so she changed the subject. "Supposedly your wife and daughters are my mortal enemies. Yet I feel a strange closeness to them today."

"Alisa does that to people, as you've doubtless noticed. But it does prove one thing. The hatred between Protectors and Tset's is nurture, not nature."

"She's a Protector? Don't they have uniforms and stuff?"

"She's not officially one. Unlike Lillith, who did graduate from the program. But Lara's enhancement has assured that Alisa shares a Protector's sweet strength. And then some."

"Lara?"

"A remarkable young woman. Like you, she lives in a remote corner of the galaxy. Her foster mother, Tala, is much like you, Galen vengeance didn't reach her either."

"Then I know who to avoid."

"Easy enough. Not many people have met a Galen..." his voice drifted off as he fell into thought. "Or known that they did."

"So how is David?"

Kalik looked back up at her. "He'll survive. Not all those with the fever do. But we have better ways of knowing nowadays. Still, his exact degree of enhancement remains to be determined."

"When?"

"Tonight. Possibly tomorrow. The course of his transformation seems to be very rapid. I suspect you had something to do with that."

Kyreen looked questioningly at him.

"It has often been found that those with prior intimate contact with Velorians are significantly more enhanced," Kalik explained. "I was a case in point."

"What you were was incredible," Kyreen said sexily, stretching herself catlike as she savored the strong, warmth that still filled her. "So strong. So passionate." She didn't say, "so big, so hard", but she knew that was part of why she felt so good inside.

Kalik smiled. "Now I know I have to leave." He paused near the armored doorway. "Your friend is down the hall. Go to him." He turned and disappeared.

Kyreen looked through the wall to watch Kalik return to his quarters, feeling a bit jealous as she watched him slip into bed to lie beside Alisa, who was still sleeping. She couldn't help but feel a sense of envy. He probably made love to her every day. Maybe more than once.

She sighed at that thought and forced herself to look away.

Scanning across the corridor, she saw that Morrison's spasms had passed. Yet he was still clutching sweat-soaked sheets to his chest as he breathed raggedly in his sleep. The younger daughter, Trina, stood beside him, sponging his brow. When she was done, she poured the remaining water from her basin over the sheets to cool him.

The girl was so beautiful, so perfect. Kyreen couldn't help but wonder if this was what her daughter would look like, except for having a darker coloration, of course.

She suddenly felt a strange desire to see her baby, to make sure she was okay. She stared at her abdomen, her eyes glowing brilliantly enough to light the room, but she saw nothing but the surface of her skin. Despite being able to look through any other substance in the universe, her own body was as opaque to her as to a human.

Sighing, Kyreen looked around for a place to shower, the scent of her lovemaking strong. The only bathroom on the ship was occupied by one of the crewmen. Searching her cabin instead, he found only the sparse clothing she'd brought with her.

Feeling lonely after getting dressed, she headed to the bridge and the company of the crewman who was on duty there. Most importantly, she had to find out how long their ship was going to be here.

After all, Westfold's date with destiny was due in a few months, and her pregnancy was going to interfere with that.

But three Velorians... they might just do.

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<http://brightempire.com/Westfold-2.pdf>