

McCloud's Daughters

Part 1

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Prologue

We were three weeks out from Velor when I saw it happen.

Our ship was traveling off the normal trade routes as our navigator tried to find a way around the very dangerous explosion of a star along the fringes of the *Nastra* nebula. Our next jump point, wormhole Abraxas 52, was located uncomfortably close to the disturbance. Even worse, a dangerous, unexplored wormhole named Cygnias 275 was located just a bit beyond it. The gravitational anomalies and x-ray and gamma ray flares were intense enough to confuse the ship's sensors, forcing the navigator to calculate their course the old fashioned way. A telescope, lot of mathematical calculations with presumed coefficients and then dead reckoning.

This was not a place to get lost.

We were passing close by an uncharted system when the alarms began clanging, waking the Blue crew halfway through their sleep period. Sensors had detected the spectrum of numerous energy weapons being discharged. Science quickly pinpointed the source to a location just outside the system's outermost planet, and fairly near to where our course was taking us. My blood chilled when the computer reported that the EM signature was Arion.

The Captain, an ex-military type, made the gung-ho decision to go to the aid of whoever was being attacked. Very untypical for the usually timid Scalantrans, but he put a lot of faith in the fact that I was on board. According to my passport, I was Velorian.

I should have told him the truth right then, but my vanity got in the way. I was too busy trying to make time with this elegant lady from Alph'ron. Velorian men fascinated her, and I didn't want to ruin the moment. God knows I'd had too few of those in my life.

So I told the Captain I'd do my best, and went back to charming my lady.

What an idiot I was. The lady from Alph'ron was soon forgotten as the Captain called me to the bridge. I sat in front of the viewscreen, praying that whatever was going on out there would be all over by the time we got close. My anxiety began to turn into terror as one of the crewmen armed me a very large GAR. I'd never held a weapon in my hands before that day.

Our eyes were glued to the viewscreen as a number of small ships maneuvered around a larger ship, the tactics clearly defensive. Our sensors couldn't pick up any energy signatures from their opponent, which pretty much guaranteed it was biological.

There weren't too many types of biologicals who engaged Arions in interstellar space. Protectors mostly. Occasionally Kryp'terrans. Maybe a Messenger they'd waylaid. They were all way out of my league. I began to pray that the Arions were all Betans. If I could avoid being shot with a GAR, I could handle a bunch of Betans.

I stared at the magnified viewscreen as we approached within 100 miles. The Arion ship had been holed several times, and its occupants had taken the battle outside. A dozen Singleton ships were swirling around a point in space. When we closed to 50 miles, the viewscreen was able to image a woman in a red and blue Protector's uniform. The Arions were blasting her with GAR's and particle weapons, casting streamers of gold her way, trying to wear her down or weaken her. As opposed to making a run for it, she kept trying to close on the Arion ship.

The Arion's tactics were brilliant as usual. Working on her eyes and lower body with their GARS, they were hoping to temporarily blind her while they used the extreme heat to distract her. They'd then try to get some gold around her.

Every Protector knew how to fend off that strategy, but this woman wasn't fighting back effectively. In fact, she had to be the worst trained Protector I'd ever heard of. She looked disoriented and confused as the Singletons closed in on her from all directions. Instead of melting them with heat vision or tearing one apart to create debris she could throw at the others, she kept trying to fly toward the Arion mothership. The occupants of the Singletons expected that, and they closed in on her each time she tried, finally reaching out to grab her with their hyper-powerful manipulators. Six of them were now wrestling with her, their jets flaring to augment their antigravs as they tried to neutralize her flight power.

The woman finally shifted tactics and began to concentrate on her attackers instead of simply trying to hole the ship. My heart was in my throat as I saw her melt one of the Singletons with her heat vision, then destroy another two by wrapping her arms around the small ships and simply crushing them. Just when I thought she was going to break away and make a run for it, a man with a hand-held rocket pack floated out an airlock and blasted across the gap to join in. He wasn't wearing a space suit. Just black leather, stretched skintight over a body that was alive with steely muscle.

A Prime, powering across the gap by dead reckoning. A desperation move by a man who couldn't fly. He unleashed a fury of GAR fire on her, the beams powerful enough to destroy one of his own Singletons. The woman's body was glowing white-hot when he discarded his weapon and wrapped his arms and legs around her, muscles standing out in incredible relief as he tried to crush the life from her. A Protector should have been able to escape that embrace, even turn that kind of battle around on her attacker, but instead, she fell limp. The gold came out and it was all over.

I stared at the viewscreen in both shock and relief as the Prime returned to the ship, leaving the woman's body floating in space, tended only by the Betans in their Singletons. They wrapped her in heavy steel cables while her body cooled. Once her skin fell below the melting temperature of gold, they wrapped her with many strands of that hated metal. There was nothing I could do now. We were too late.

Unfortunately, the rest of the Scalantran crew didn't know that. They were staring at me, wondering when I was going to get my ass in gear and go help a fellow Velorian.

I didn't move. There was something very wrong with this scene, but I couldn't see through the glare well enough to figure it out. But something about her wasn't right. I told the Scalantrans that, but they looked at me as if I was a coward. I heard someone muttering about my being a coward. A man who didn't have the basic decency to go the aid of a young woman of his own race.

It wasn't until the woman's body cooled below incandescence that my suspicions were confirmed. She wasn't a Protector. Instead, her hair was long and Arion black.

The Captain saw it first. "What the hell is an Arion doing wearing a Protector's uniform and fighting the Empire?"

I smiled. This would definitely get me off the hook. I lied and told them I'd suspected this all along. He looked at me as if I was an even lower form of worm now.

"And you want them to have her?" The Captain stared at me like I was some kind of slime mold. "A woman courageous enough to fight against the evil of her own Empire. Wearing the colors of your own Enlightenment."

Everyone's eyes were back on me now. The old saying, "*The enemy of my enemy is my friend*" was on everyone's lips. There wasn't a clause in that piece of ancient wisdom that excluded certain hair colors. Damn it.

The Captain proved he was indeed a Scalantran by getting himself off the hook, and neatly sinking it the rest of the way into me. "If we take this ship any closer, they'll nuke us. But you Velorians can survive nukes."

The bastard. I should just tell him the truth and be done with it. Tell him that I was just an enhanced human. That I had no training in this kind of thing. I glanced up at the screen, and saw the remaining Singleton nudging her body toward the airlock. I turned and saw that the lady from Alph'ron had joined us on the bridge. She was smiling at me, knowing that her knight in shining armor who was going to come to the rescue. It was insane, but I had to do something. For the sake of Velorian pride, if not for my own.

Spinning around, I ran toward the airlock. Cycling through it as fast as could, I was very careful to push off in the right direction. I don't fly very well, and I'm not about to get lost in space by trying. My strategy, more desperation than thought out plan, was to blast the woman with the GAR in the hope of releasing her gold bonds.

I closed to within two miles before I fired at max power, and was astounded when my first shot hit her. The gold strands surrounding her body vaporized with a flash of energy. She responded by launching the Singleton toward the ship so fast that it punched another huge hole through the pressure hull. The shields were obviously down. She propelled her own body the same way, turning it into a lethal projectile.

I twisted back around to find the Scalantran ship, but all I saw was the infinite star field behind me. I scanned for the tiny dot that was the only intact pressure hull within a billion miles, but couldn't see a thing. My eyes weren't much different than human, and I was fifty miles or more from the ship.

Looking in-system, the yellowish sun was little more than an oversized star from this distance. Whatever planets might be circling it were weeks away, even if I could accelerate/decelerate all the way. The panic started to well up inside me. Unlike a real Velorian, I couldn't live long in vacuum. A day at most, most of that time spent comatose.

The only ship in sight was the Arion starship, and its engineering compartments were starting to glow as the rest of the ship went cold. It was dead. Engines probably ripe for a containment breach if they couldn't reestablish the fields. The attacking woman seemed determined to ensure they didn't.

My lungs were already burning. Damn it, it wasn't supposed to end like this. My vision started to dim as the first sign of hypoxia came over me. I blinked my eyes and turned my head, trying to see where the woman was. I saw only a blur of black hair approaching. Her strong arms wrapped around me and the next thing I knew, we were hurtling through space at incredible speed, accelerating toward the faint glow of the adjacent system. My thoughts softened further as my vision faded to black. I was falling into a hypoxic dream...

I saw myself back on Earth. It was my sixteenth birthday. I was both excited and anxious. Two years earlier, I'd gotten involved with these terrorists and had given myself up to them in return for releasing two female hostages. Amazingly, this stunningly hot blonde arrived on the scene and took the terrorists out, despite their shooting her uncounted times.

I'd heard the urban legends. Everybody had. That some kind of alien beings were protecting Earth. They called themselves Protectors. But until that day, I'd dismissed it as just so much Internet noise.

No longer. I did my research. I found a lot of underground material on these people called Velorians. I joined various groups and traded a lot of email with other believers. One of the emails that I got back was from someone called Xara. She described the terrorist incident exactly, something only the girl who'd saved me could have known, and said she'd granted me Koral'ing for my bravery. Which meant I could ask anything of her. Like a genie and his lamp but you only get one wish. She promised to come to my sixteenth birthday to bestow her gift.

I didn't hear from her again, but deep inside, I believed everything she'd said. The result was that those next two years were a lifetime.

Finally, October 12th and my sixteenth birthday arrived. Jerry, my best friend, organized a huge birthday party, and half the school was here. Jerry had blurted out something about a Velorian showing up. He provided links to those underground web pages, which claimed to be able to explain the weird sightings and events of recent years. The urban legend of these alien Protectors had grown into a worldwide phenom. Many people claimed to have first hand sightings, but the pictures on the Net all looked fake. Nobody who made her living as some kind of super cop would look like a supermodel. They certainly wouldn't wear costumes that belonged in a comic book.

Unfortunately, my birthday party was almost over and there weren't any superblondes there. Other than Karen Mark who'd dressed as sexily as Velorians were reputed to do. She was hot. But Karen or not, everyone was grumbling, getting ready to leave, figuring this was my idea of a bad joke.

And then my life changed forever more.

The tallest and most stunningly beautiful woman I'd ever seen floated through the doorway, blonde hair floating everywhere. It was Xara, all dressed up in a gold metallic uniform, her skirt so short that it was shocking. The 'S' insignia of her profession was proudly displayed on her breast.

I stared open-mouthed as she walked up to me and wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed me in front of my 10th grade friends. My world turned golden as she buried me beneath a sea of blonde perfection, her long, passionate kiss so intense that I felt the floor falling away.

I wasn't sure if it was her kiss or if we were really flying at first, and after that, I must have passed out. The next thing I remember was lying next to a

bubbling Jacuzzi. Xara was in the water, leaning back against the other side, her golden uniform hanging over a chair. She was naked, perfect breasts visible at the surface of the bubbling water, and she was smiling at me.

It was too good to be true. I've always been a lucid dreamer, and I'd been dreaming of a hundred ways this day could go down. Dreams that lived within dreams. But this was a really good one.

I watched her eyes as she scanned up and down my body before smiling. That wasn't the usual female reaction to the way I look. Gangly limbs and freckled skin with yellow hair, a lot of it in places other than my head, and milky green eyes and a badly freckled complexion, I was no gift to women. If I were a dog, I'd be a cross between a Golden Retriever and a bloodhound.

She floated closer, wrapping her slender arms gently around my neck to kiss me.

That was nice. Really nice.

Her blonde hair was totally amazing. Platinum pure, every strand perfect and glowing, just like her eyes. Her skin looked like an airbrushed photograph, even up close. No pores, blemish free and smooth as silk, the shade golden tan. And of course, she was wickedly fit. Like a thousand times fit. She looked twentyish, but who could tell with a Vel. They were supposed to live forever.

I felt myself weakening as I looked into those big blue eyes, framed by that platinum hair and those invitingly moist lips. She guided herself upward slightly, and I felt my stiffness pressing against those soft folds at the entrance to heaven.

My imagination raced.

She was going to take me, right now, right here. She was a warrior goddess and her only mission was to fuck me to within an inch of my life. I had until dawn to ask anything of her I wished. Six hours of god-like bliss.

Except this time, it wasn't just my imagination.

I almost went for it. If not for my two years of planning and dreaming, I would have succumbed, pheromones or not. She was that cute. Instead, I closed my eyes and shook my head, pushing her away.

Her eyes opened wide, almost like someone had just slapped her. I'm betting nobody had ever turned her down before. She tried to kiss me again, so I blurted out my wish while I still could.

I said I wanted to finish my education on Velor.

She laughed unkindly; telling me my wish was ridiculous. It was outside her power. I couldn't survive the high gravity field of Velor for more than a day. I had to go through a wormhole to get there in any case. That would take a ship. She didn't have a ship.

All good excuses to use on anyone else. But not on Ben Smith.

I stubbornly insisted on my wish, telling her there wasn't an escape clause in a Koral'ing. I was guessing at that last thing, but she cursed in some language I didn't know and floated up out of the Jacuzzi to stalk naked across the hotel room. She was still soaking wet as she pulled golden uniform back on. God, her legs went on forever beneath that short skirt. I briefly imagined her making it with me dressed that way. I felt my willpower fading, but before I could open my mouth and change my wish, she was gone.

I slumped back in the hot tub. I'd really blown it now. I could have lost my virginity to her. I could have enjoyed a night of the best sex in the universe. I could have had a Protector teach me things that no other human man knew about eroticism. There wasn't one other sixteen-year-old guy in the universe who'd turn down that kind of birthday present.

And I had to go ask for something she couldn't do.

I got showered, dressed and took a cab home. I figured my Koral'ing was cancelled due to stupidity.

Mine.

The party was still going on. Everyone was still jabbering about Xara. When I walked back into the room, the guys looked at me like I was some kind of god. Girls who'd never given me a second look suddenly found me attractive. If a Velorian wanted me, then I had to be hot stuff.

I could have told them the truth. That nothing had happened. That I'd turned down a night of incredible sex for a better education.

Right.

Instead, I told them how I'd saved her life. I said she'd wanted to thank me in the way that Velorians do, but only after I turned sixteen. That she was my birthday present, sort of.

I didn't dignify the hundred rude questions that followed with any straight answers. I let them imagine what they wanted. They'd never believe the truth any way. That I'd blown it.

Except I hadn't.

Six months later, Xara showed up again. She stood there in that same golden uniform, an acre of blonde hair floating around her head, holding a space suit. As I understand it now, this whole Koral'ing and Kiral'ing business is very central to Velorian culture. If anything is sacred to them, this was it. So while she was still mad at me, she'd come back to honor her promise. Because it really was in her power.

Two hours later I was lying naked in her cabin on a Scalantran ship. A real starship, piloted by these aliens that looked like something out of Star Trek. Xara was floating just above me in a similar state of undress. She buried my face buried beneath all that golden hair as she kissed me, wiggling her hips, guiding me to that moist entrance to nirvana. She said that even if I didn't want to make love to her, this time I had to. Otherwise I'd die.

As if I needed an incentive.

Xara spent four nights with me before diving out the airlock to return to Earth. Four incredible, mind-blowing days during which we made love almost constantly.

And then the reality of what she'd done to me sunk in. I was sick as a dog from the retrovirus, my fever so high that the ship's doctor put me in quarantine until he figured out what I had. He thought he was going to lose me, despite having all kinds of medicines that were supposed to work on humans.

I recovered despite him. And when I got back into my cabin and undressed, I found I had some amazing new abilities to master. I couldn't wait to get to Velor. A planet with millions of always willing, sexy Velorian girls.

When I stepped out the hatch of the shuttlecraft three months later, the Velorian gravity didn't bother me at all. And all around me, I saw the blonde perfection I'd dreamed of so many times. I felt like a Willy Wonka, lost in a chocolate factory.

To make a long story short, I finished the equivalent of high school on Velor, and then went on to the University. When my graduation day came, I managed to get assigned to the Diplomatic Corps. They always needed help on human worlds, especially in areas where they wanted to stay low profile. Willowy blondes who could make a supermodel feel ugly were definitely not low profile. Especially not when they could bench press your average fully-loaded shuttlecraft. Those things weighed in at just under a million pounds.

My job involved keeping the diplomatic staff and their families out of trouble with the locals. Mostly their kids. Officially, we were called Cultural Analysts. Less charitably, the adults called us Minders. The kids started with Meddlers before they got really insulting. I didn't care what they called us. Our job was to keep them out of trouble. And when we couldn't do that, we fixed what they broke. Broken hearts not included.

The problem was that Velorian expat kids became arrogant brats once they got out of Velor's gold field. Imagine your average mid-teen boy or girl suddenly becoming a young god or goddess in the middle of a world of ordinary humans?

It wasn't that they were bad kids for the most part, but when you remove all boundaries and limits on a teenager, things get twisted a bit out of perspective. Especially with that inbred Velorian penchant for inducing otherwise decent adults to do really stupid things. What with their looks, their pheromones and their boldness, the girls in particular were wreaking havoc on societal norms by the age of fourteen. If not for the repeal of statutory rape laws for Velorians on Enlightenment worlds, a lot of otherwise good men would have gone to jail.

I tried diversion, starting by organizing all kinds of sporting events. Most of them were played with balls the size of small houses, with the goal posts separated by a few thousand miles of vacuum. Getting the kids off-planet was a godsend. They couldn't get into trouble in space.

In my second year on the job, I organized spelunking expeditions to the core of some volcanic planets, and then put the kids to work mapping the surface of all the other planets in the system. I turned it into a big scavenger hunt. That actually went over pretty well. Vels are competitive and curious by nature. Natural explorers.

Naturally, they went too far, turning that game into a kind of solar plunging contest. They guys competed with each other to see how deeply into the sun they could descend.

The girls invented a sexy corollary to the game called 'solar sex'. Testing the guys to see how deeply into the photosphere they could make it with them. The kids really went for that one for reasons only a Velorian could understand. It at least ensured they didn't have time or energy to play their seduction games with Ordinaries any more.

Just teenage games, but that last game scared me. A Vel who got too enthusiastic and descended too deeply would surely be killed. I didn't want to have to explain that to some parent. Or why they were there in the first place.

But the kids were faster, stronger and usually smarter than me, so there wasn't much I could do except lecture them on safe sex, Velorian-style. You can

imagine how different that lecture was than the ones I'd heard back on Earthy. But all that said, lecturing doesn't have much of an effect on invulnerable teenagers who think they're hot stuff. Especially the girls. They were the worst.

Fortunately, my first assignment ended without anyone getting killed, either human or Velorian. I considered that a victory.

The Diplomatic Service must have too, because they gave me another assignment. Kellog 2. A dusty, hot mining planet. Two dozen Velorian families lived there. It was the longest three years of my life, especially since the kids were pretty well behaved. I complained about the constant heat, and eventually the Diplomatic Corp responded.

I was transferred to Reigel 5. It was the opposite of Kellog 2. Cold as hell, and the kids were totally screwed up. Especially the ambassador's children, Nikki and James. I'll never forget those two. I spent a year trying to untangle the constant messes they got into. Nikki in particular drove me crazy. Being that I was an enhanced human, she constantly tried to wrap me around her fingers. Once she figured out that pheromones didn't work on, she started to slip into my bed in the middle of the night. I'd wake up in the middle of this exquisitely passionate dream, only to face the reality of her giving me a blowjob. You can imagine how much willpower it took to kick her out of bed.

I subsequently had this long discussion with her mother about whether a man was responsible for what he does in a dream. Nikki overheard the rationalizations I was spouting under the guise of philosophy, and we both knew that if I woke up any slower the next time, deliberately or not, she'd have me. At which point she quit coming by. The little bitch. It was all a big mind game for her.

Still, it was the Ordinaries that I really worried about, especially with James. As a native Velorian, his sexual release was powerful enough to really injure a woman. I imagined having to clean up after some woman's head had been blown off. An ugly image. The ladies of course didn't know that, and they all loved seducing their man of steel, a man with the equipment of a porn star, never realizing how hard he worked to keep in control. He wound up faking orgasms to keep them happy, then going off on his own to relieve the pressure. That was one twisted boy.

Fortunately, the Ambassador's youngest daughter, her name was Alisa, wasn't a problem at all. She was reputedly a P1, but didn't act it. She kept her hair pinned up and wore these big glasses and dressed like a girl headed for the convent. Except for that time she helped arrest that Arion Prime. She blew me away when she let her hair down and started acting like a Protector. They really do make those P1's from different stuff.

Then there was the mess with the President, and the Ambassador was recalled to Velor. I heard later that Alisa had refused her Rites back on Velor and ran away. I guess it really is the quiet ones you have to worry about.

I was reassigned to Smyths Vault, a Vendorian settlement. That was where the Vendorians were currently making their weapons. Their nomadic ships would converge on a mineral rich but unpopulated system that was easily defensible, and then link up in space to form an industrial city. A thousand ships, a million Vendorians, all that was left of their race. They called such a gathering a Vault. Supposedly a dozen Protectors were stationed at this one to augment the already strong Vendorian defenses. The Vendorians kept their most fearsome weapons for themselves.

A pretty big group of supporting expats had moved there from Velor. Some worked in areas of the manufacturing process that were too dangerous for humans. The rest were diplomats and members of the various trade delegations.

I was enroute to this new assignment in that Scalantran ship when I blacked out after breaking that dark-haired Protector free from her bonds.

Chapter One

My vivid dream faded slowly, the way it always had since I'd been enhanced. The closest analogy would be turning down the brightness on a holo, the images turning translucent and then fading to a cloud-filled whirlpool of colors.

My protective instincts had cut in when I'd started to dream about dying from exposure. I was lucid enough even in a dream to understand that dreaming about death was a good way to pack it in. Enhanced or not, you were dead if you blew out your own heart.

I struggled with all my willpower to escape the trap of my dream, finally focusing all my concentration on the simple act of moving one finger. If I could regain control of even the smallest part of my body, I could wake up the rest of the way.

It took forever, but I finally managed to move my little finger. Then I struggled to blink one eye open. Success. A blurry image of a blue ceiling swam into view.

Climbing rapidly out of my intense dream now, I forced both eyes open. A woman leaning over me now. Her hair was Arion black and long and wavy, her eyes Supremis blue.

An Arion?

I decided this had to be another dream, for I wasn't in a cage, chained in gold. I was on a very soft bed. And instead of a black leather uniform, the woman wore a stylish business suit and a tie. Very formal and very Terran. She was speaking English, but with a Velorian accent. Astoundingly, she wore the 'V' ring of a Protector on her right hand.

That didn't make any sense at all given her hair color. I was certain now that I'd lost myself in a dream within a dream. Another bad thing for a lucid dreamer to do. You could lose touch with reality all together that way.

Yet her voice was soft and melodious and seemingly real as she talked. She leaned down to kiss my cheek as she thanked me for saving her life. Her lips were soft and warm, her breath sweet with a hint of wildflowers. Her kisses gently traced across my cheek to find my lips. The faint taste of honey delighted me as she breathed softly into my lungs, her breath so fragrant with wildflowers now.

I was suddenly wide-awake, my body's defenses instinctively kicking in to block her pheromones. I tried to sit up, but she kept kissing me, urgently now. It took all my strength to turn my head and break her passionate kiss.

I gasped for air, clearly remembering the sensation of the vacuum sucking the air from my lungs, the helpless feeling of my diaphragm tensing and relaxing, yet having nothing to inhale. Then the terrifying sensation of slowly losing consciousness, knowing I was going to die out there in deep space, half a billion miles from the nearest planet.

"Who... where am I?" I gasped as I shrank away from her. Far from being turned on by her kisses, I had visions of the kind of violent rape that Arions are infamous for. In their culture, rape wasn't just a crime committed against women. With their pheromones, they could compel a man to perform for them, despite pain and even serious injury.

"We call this planet Sanctuary. I'm Ann McCloud."

An Arion with a Scottish name? Ridiculous. "Sanctuary?," I blurted out. "Never heard of it. And I'm Ben Smith."

She held out her hand and I took it. Her fingers were long and strong, her handshake very firm. "That's just the point, Ben Smith. Nobody knows we exist."

I looked around the room. I could have been on Earth. "Not even the Empire?"

"Especially not the Empire. Sanctuary is a human world. Other than for my daughters and I."

I sat up to look more closely at her. She was tall, and very slender yet athletic in the way of a Supremis. I looked again at the 'V' ring on her finger. Had she killed a Protector and taken her ring as a souvenir? She watched my eyes.

"Before you ask, yes, I am. A Protector. Kind of."

I was still groggy enough that I couldn't help but laugh out loud.

"Right. And I'm Superman."

"Who?"

"Just some Earth myth."

"You're from Earth. So that explains it."

"Explains what?"

"That you have only some of a Velorian's powers, and that you don't look like one, despite your passport."

"I used to live there."

Her left eyebrow lifted. "The universe is indeed a strange place, Ben Smith. In this corner of the universe, I am a Protector. And you are a human from Velor who saved my life."

"Yeah, very strange," I said, looking around. Too strange.

"I owe you the right of Kiral'ing, Ben Smith. For saving my life."

I couldn't help but laugh again. "I saved you? Last I remember, I was a billion miles from nowhere."

"A half billion miles."

I rolled my eyes. "Close enough."

"We saved each other's lives, Ben. Yours through an act of selfless courage. Mine was merely compassion. And obligation. So the Kiral'ing is mine alone."

I stared at her as I tried to separate the components of my now fading dream from reality. That's always a challenge for a lucid dreamer after waking up too fast. What I did know for sure was that Kiral'ing is the greatest honor a Velorian can bestow. It's a much deeper commitment than that the lesser Koral'ing that Xara had given me years before. And it lasts for a lifetime, not for just one wish.

"You seem surprised?" she said softly. "Yet you've clearly been around Supremis. You claim to have been on Velor itself, although I've never heard of a human living there."

"I went to school there."

She smiled. "So you're one of those really successful enhancees I'd heard about."

I quickly blurted out my story about Xara.

"You were rewarded by a Protector before? For saving lives. How amazing." She kissed me tenderly on my forehead. "You must be a guardian angel."

I wasn't ready to go there. After living on Velor, I knew something of angels. They were blonde and beautiful. Instead, I was just in the right place at the right time.

I looked carefully at Ann. She seemed to have an air of authority about her. And that hair. Definitely Arion.

She saw the look in my eyes and started to tell me her tale, sitting on the side of the bed as she talked. She had indeed been born Primal, but her parents had been killed in a battle when she was only two years old. Badly injured herself, she was rescued and taken back to Velor to be nursed back to health. She subsequently grew up in a government lab, the secretly adopted daughter of the Director. He in turn made an interesting proposal to the Science Ministry. A number of Velorian scientists had long been worried whether Aphrodite's enhancement during the Rites would affect an Arion to the same degree as a Velorian. Could another Galen take the Arions under her wing, and increase the power of their Primes?

Two theories evolved from that discussion. One that said there was something intrinsic in Velorian DNA, and the Rites could only work for the young women of Velor. The other group reminded the Ministry that Velorians and Arions had once been one people. That the genetic differences were less than one tenth of one percent.

The Director finally proposed a way to end the debate. He offered his secretly adopted daughter up to undergo the same Rites as a Protector. The High Council of Protectors and Aphro'dite herself reluctantly agreed.

Shockingly, Ann gained all the powers and abilities of a Protector during her Rites, even to the point of growing a Velorian volatai during the subsequent months. Even scarier, her strength was on the upper fringe of Protectors. If she'd been Velorian, she would have been selected for training as a Virago.

The High Council, terrified now, asserted its ancient authority and tried to suppress the whole affair, going so far as to order her adopted father to sanitize the project. Her adoptive father was appalled. Ann was only 14 years old. She was an innocent. Furthermore, he loved her more than life itself.

He defied the Council by slipping her aboard an outbound ship under an assumed name. The captain was a friend, but he wasn't a fool. As soon he was out of Velorian space, he'd consigned Ann to a small space capsule that was programmed for a wormhole-of-no-return, so called because no one had ever returned through it. Anything was better than the certain death she'd face when a Protector eventually discovered her. He wiped all the ship's records and put her on a high dose of tranks.

She awakened from the tranks months later on this isolated planet. She dressed like a local, and inserted herself into the society, hiding her unique

abilities. She quickly learned that the planet was called Sanctuary, and the locals hadn't had contact with anyone since the Galen had dropped them off here two centuries earlier. Perhaps the records had gotten lost, or perhaps the Galen wrote the colony off after their ship crashed. Whatever the truth of the matter, nobody knew they were here. The dangerous nearby nebula and the scarcity of wormholes in this region of the galaxy ensured that no trade routes passed nearby. And their radio transmissions would take hundreds of years to cross from one star system to the next. They had no working starships or the knowledge to make them.

Realizing that this was one of the few places she could stay hidden, Ann tried to live a normal life, and had risen to the position of CEO of a small publishing firm. Then the Arion scout ship stumbled upon their world. She watched like all other Sanctuarians as the Arions destroyed a village, enslaving the most attractive young women to serve them on their ship. Unlike the others, Ann fought back. She dug out the forbidden uniform that Aphro'dite had given her, and before she knew what was happening, she'd destroyed the Arion ship. There were no Arion survivors.

She'd traveled off planet many times since then, always pretending to be an Arion. She struck up a friendship with an elderly Arion statesman named And'ril, the last living member of the founders of Aria. He'd been ordered back to Aria. Past his tenth century of life, he didn't want to return to weakness and heavy gravity to die. So instead, he and Ann formed a desperate plan. He returned with her to Sanctuary and they subsequently married.

But he could not give her a child.

Ann went wandering again, this time meeting and seducing a Kryp'terran man. He visited every few years, eventually giving her the children that And'ril could not.

Aayla was 29, Klara was 23 and Paris was 18.

And then a miracle. Myra was born. She was now the youngest at 16. Her father was And'ril himself. A man approaching his tenth century of life.

Ann's story was the most fantastic thing I'd ever heard. She really was an Arion Protector, as nutty as that sounded. Yet in my mind, she was behaving more like a Procreator instead of a Protector, since Protectors are forbidden to have children the natural way.

My face must have shown my disbelief when she finished telling her tale. "You don't believe any of this, do you?"

I didn't know what to say. An Arion, enhanced by Aphrod'ite, the most sacred ritual on Velor. I refused to believe it. The distinctive 'V' ring on her right hand was Aphrod'ite's gift to the girls she enhanced. It looked so out of place given Ann's hair color.

On the other hand, no Arion could fly, and she definitely could.

Whatever the case, I wasn't in any danger. A Kiral'ing is sacred. She'd give her own life to protect mine. If anything, the Arions were even more religious about following the custom than the Velorians.

"Of course I do," I lied. "It's just that..." my voice trailed away.

"You need proof. Beyond my battle with the Arion scoutship?"

"It's just so far outside the boundaries of anything I'd even heard rumors about back on Velor, especially given the war and..."

Ann silenced me in mid-sentence by reaching up and tearing her blouse open. Shockingly, she wore the metallic blue of a Velorian Protector's uniform beneath her it, complete with the now archaic but still distinctive 'S' symbol.

"Does this convince you?"

I stared in awe at her very colorful chest as an elderly man walked across the room to stand beside her, putting his arm possessively around her waist. His hair was white, his face wrinkled and he was hunched over, but his still youthful eyes said he was Arion. This had to be And'ril, her husband. A May/October marriage if I'd ever seen one.

He looked deeply into my eyes as he traced a wrinkled finger over the bright 'S' on his wife's chest. "Nice uniform, isn't it? A piece of history." He winked playfully at me. "Doesn't go too well with the hair, though."

I started to nod, confused by everything I'd just heard, and uncomfortable with the way he was caressing his wife in front of me. It felt weird to watch the two of them embracing each other, obviously still in love, yet with him so old and wrinkled and her so young and attractive.

"Have you told him yet, my dear?"

"He's barely woken up, And'ril." Ann turned to lead her frail husband halfway across the large room. They began whispering.

"We need to know soon, Ann, or we'll have to find someone else."

"He's not Velorian. Just an enhanced Terran."

"How good of an enhancement?"

Ann shrugged and then started to explain how I'd saved her by engaging those Arions.

"Ah, I don't mean to intrude," I said, trying not to blush at her enthusiastic comments, "and I do enjoy hearing about my so-called heroics, but the answer is, it's very good."

And'ril looked at Ann with raised eyebrow as his voice returned to normal. "You should find out for sure, Ann. Before we involve the girls."

Ann nodded and kissed her husband on the cheek. Her eyes focused on mine as she walked toward me, the shimmer of her uniform looking so sexy beneath her open top. She took my hand and led me down a hallway and through the door into a huge executive office. She locked the door behind her and began to peel off the rest of her business suit, revealing the rest of a Protector's uniform.

I smiled broadly as she floated in front of me like some kind of bright Christmas ornament, the air filling with her scent. Apparently Protectors everywhere acted the same regardless of hair color.

Before I knew it, we were flying.

We landed minutes later in a deserted park at the edge of the city. Lying on the warm grass, Ann looked so impossibly sexy in her tiny skirt and skintight uniform. Her kisses found my lips, sweet, soulful and so sexy, and before I knew it, I was kissing my way across her breasts, stroking her hardening nipples with my strength, tracing my lips up to hers. Her tongue found mine to inflame me with desire, her hands finding my manhood, holding me with an erotic strength that only a Protector possessed. Hers was a desperate, possessive sexuality, almost as if she was afraid to let go. Like she'd found a treasure she never wanted to let go of.

She clearly hadn't had a man for some time.

I decided to do one more good deed this week. Closing my eyes, I let down my guard against her pheromones. Inhaling their wonder, my body flushed from head to toe, the insanity coming over me only seconds later. I opened my eyes, and leaped playfully into the erotic sea of our desires.

Did I say sea? Try ocean.

My God, what a woman she was. For twelve hours straight she flew from one orgasm to the next, each one seemingly better than the last. The Arions could have come, the world could have ended, the star gone supernova, and we wouldn't have noticed. She was everything I'd imagined a Protector could be, but never had a chance to discover. A lover of bottomless enthusiasm and intensity. Tenderness, excitement, athleticism, kindness, kinkiness, pain, pleasure... every word that had ever been remotely connected to eroticism, they all became but pale and fancy words for an event that truly had no human equivalent. The total and complete immersion in eroticism. Loving without limits. Every fiber of our bodies and souls merged with the single desire of pleasing each other.

The Velorians call it *sorn'fuk*. The act of losing oneself in physical love. But if you haven't lived on Velor, you'd have to expand your imagination to the limits and beyond to have even a clue of what I'm talking about.

I also discovered something new. That sleeping with a woman who wants to get pregnant is different than fucking just for pleasure. Despite the fact that she refused to take off her shiny uniform, out of respect for And'ril and her vows she said, her tiny skirt provided no obstacle to our loving. Penetration was the name of the game. My peaks of passion, expended as deeply inside her as possible, were her passions as well.

But enhanced human or not, a superman by human standards, I eventually ran out of energy. She wasn't doing a lot better, but together we managed to find our way to her house. And'ril greeted us at the door with hot towels and herbal tea. He was equally solicitous of me as he was of Ann, massaging her tired body. Then mine. That was a little too kinky for, so I retreated to the large pool behind her house.

Ann joined me, each of us gently bathing the other. She soon gave up on trying to bring any kind of order to my yellow mop. Instead, she climbed out of the pool and made me a great breakfast. Fruits and bacon and eggs and some pastries that melted in my mouth. A big improvement over ship's food. She was so good to me that I didn't want to go back to my hotel, doting the way she was on my every whim. But she eventually handed me a key and two envelopes, and then kissed me goodbye at the door.

The first envelope directed me toward a very tall building. Twice as tall as the Empire State building back in New York, although small compared to the towering Hall of Protectors on Velor. The key got me past the doorman, up the elevator and through the door of a very nice penthouse suite on the 190th floor. I felt like a kept man as I wandered through the huge rooms and then out onto the glass balcony. I looked straight down between my feet at the ground two thousand feet below. Thank God heights no longer bothered me since I'd learned how to fly.

I spent the evening drinking good whiskey from the well-stocked bar, waiting until I was half drunk before I dared open the second envelope. Inside I found a note with directions and times for a meeting with Ann's youngest daughter, Myra.

Chapter Two

I was a bit hung-over the next morning as I tried to find my way to the designated meeting place: a city park. Nobody who looked remotely like a Supremis was there. Just a lot of scruffy looking people who'd slept the night on the park benches. The phone in my pocket buzzed during my third circuit of the park. It was Ann. She apologized and said Myra had been called into work. Some kind of emergency. She gave me the address of where I could find her.

I stepped into the street and flagged down a cab.

The cabbie dropped me off at a street full of flashing lights and jammed up traffic. Some kind of construction accident. An oversized flat bed truck had tipped over to drop a huge section of prefab concrete onto the road. It had flattened two small cars and part of a bus, and collapsed part of the street. I felt sorry for anyone who'd been in those cars.

I recall Ann telling me that Myra was an elite member of the Fire Rescue Department. A sergeant or something. Not bad for a sixteen-year-old girl.

I saw a girl her age talking to the firemen, but I doubted it was her. She wore jeans and denim top, and her skin had a pinkish tint, not the permatan that I was used to from Velor. She was also far too short for a Supremis, looking tiny next to the strapping paramedics and firemen.

Then I noticed that her raven black hair, parted down the center, was shimmering with a hint of dark purple. I'd read somewhere that midnight purple denoted the purest of pure Arion genetic track. And'ril was supposedly one of the Old Ones, first born after the gene bomb. If this was Myra, then I was looking back into history, staring into a face that matched that of the earliest Arions.

She seemed to feel my eyes on her back. Turning to stare back at me, her eyes sparkled like blue diamonds in the sunlight. No doubt it now. This was Myra.

She gave me a wave, and a shy smile tilted her lips. I started to walk toward her, only to be interrupted when one of the paramedics who was working around the other side of the bus called out something about possible survivors. Myra joined the rush of rescue workers as they converged on his location. Everyone held their breath as Myra brushed the hair from one ear and listened for several long seconds. Finally, she nodded.

Strangely, instead of digging in with their rescue equipment, the firemen began hauling it out of the way. Myra circled the end of what I could now see was a prefab section of a bridge. She grabbed the end of it, and I heard the crunch of shattering ferroconcrete from fifty feet away as she dug her fingers in to their roots. She bit her lip and tried to lift it. The span gave off an agonizing groan, but it didn't budge.

Until that moment, I hadn't fully realized what Ann had meant when she told me that her daughters had been fully integrated into Sanctuary life. Now I knew. They lived openly among the otherwise ordinary humans. Like on an Enlightenment world.

She spread her feet and adjusted her stance to try again.

I scanned the length of the structure, trying to estimate the weight in my head. Easily four hundred tons. Maybe half again that much. I debated walking over to help her, but I wasn't sure how much I could help.

She gritted her teeth and strained again. This time the span lifted nearly a foot before she dropped it. The ground shuddered beneath my feet. She struggled a third time, arms shaking and face growing red as she finally grunted one end of the span up to waist height. The pavement cracked around her feet as the firefighters bravely ducked under the incredible weight, going to work with their tools. Minutes later, they emerged holding an infant. I heard them shouting about a second girl who was still alive. Three more fireman wiggled their bodies under the span to explore a section of the bus that'd hadn't been completely crushed.

Unfortunately, Myra looked as if she was going to drop the span on them. Without thinking, I rushed over to add my strength to hers. My legs were soon shaking from the strain as badly as hers, yet together we managed to hoist one end of the massive weight back onto the trailer. Two tires blew out. We shifted it again, and four more tires blew before the trailer rotated back up to rest on all tires. With one end now resting on the flatbed, we walked to the other end. She dug fingers into the ferroconcrete to get a good grip again, and I grabbed the bottom of the span. Together we lifted with every ounce of strength we had, and barely finally managed to slide the span all the way onto the flatbed.

Myra flashed me a silent thank before walking briskly across the street. She leaned down and wrapped her arms around a steel pillar that had recently been sunk into the sidewalk. I suspected that was what had caused the truck to veer to the side and dump its load, trying to avoid the unplanned No Parking zone. I gawked as she wrenched the pillar out of the ground, tearing a huge hole in the pavement as she did. She did the same for three others, piling them neatly against the building. The owner of the building came out and began to scream at her, talking about his property rights. A couple of cops took him over to their patrol car to fill out some forms.

I walked across the street to join Myra as she brushed her hands off. She held one hand out as she looked up at me.

"Hi. I'm Myra McCloud."

"There was never any doubt," I said as I took her hand, glancing back toward the overloaded truck trailer. "That was pretty impressive."

Her fingers were long and slender, her grip slowly tightening, clearly testing me. I was reminded that the Old Ones were stronger than Velorians, notwithstanding the P1's.

"You weren't so bad yourself. Ben, isn't it?"

I nodded. "I couldn't have budged that thing in a month of Sundays. You were awesome."

She shrugged. "I inherited some good genes."

"Good genes?" I grinned. "Is that like saying the sun is warm?"

She laughed. "Mom told me you had a strange sense of humor. Welcome to Sanctuary."

"I'm glad to be here. Considering."

"I want to thank you for saving my mother's life, Ben."

"I think it was mutual. Consider us even."

"But you left your ship to save her. You didn't have to do that."

"It wasn't as selfless a deed as you might suspect."

"But an honorable one none the less. We all owe you one of those debts that can never be paid."

"You don't owe me a thing, Myra. Rescuing people seems to be my thing lately."

"Me too," she said brightly.

"Speaking of which, that was a rather remarkable piece of rescue work over there."

She looked back where the fire rescue squad was cleaning up. "Six people died in those cars, Ben, four of them children. The two we rescued have serious injuries. I doubt if the older girl will live. I don't find that remarkable."

"I was talking about the way you got that bridge section off that bus. It would have taken a day to get enough cranes in there to hoist it. Probably too late for the little one."

She shrugged. "I do what I can."

"Modesty from a Prime?" I grinned. "I didn't think that was possible."

She turned back, her eyes smiling. "My only gift is my muscles. And they aren't really that big."

"Muscles that barely one in fifty billion beings can match, Myra. Not to mention using that strength to help others. Most Primes are just interested in..."

"Can I buy you a cup of Espresso," she interrupted, clearly uncomfortable talking about herself this way. I saw a hint of weariness in her eyes.

"That little feat took a lot out of you."

She stretched her arms over her head. "I'll be sore tomorrow, that's for sure. That thing was really heavy."

"Yeah, and you're a real weakling. I could tell."

She laughed softly and held my arm tightly as she steered me through the door of a coffee shop. "Not that the locals would ever notice."

"All Ordinaries?"

She sighed. "Unfortunately."

"You should be proud to contribute to their society the way you do."

"It's my society too. I was born here."

"Which is amazing all by itself. Do you have any idea how few Supremis are born outside the Velorian and Arion systems?"

She nodded. "It isn't supposed to happen. Ever. Mom told us. Which is why this place has become our little prison. Keeping the secret of Sanctuary safe and all that jazz."

"Tell me about it."

"I'd rather talk about you. Why your ship was so close to our system. And how you got this way? You know, enhanced and all."

I gave her the Cliff Notes version. She asked a lot about Xara, but I didn't have much to offer. Xara and I had been too busy on that Scalantran ship to talk much. Instead, I went on to talk about the latest things I'd heard about Velorian/Arion politics.

Soon the Espresso appeared. I took a sip of the bitter brew. It was good. Very good.

"So, as I said, you saved Mom's life out there Ben. I really want to thank you for that. Any way that I can."

I chuckled. "Your mother already did."

"Did you enjoy your *sorn'fuk*?" I saw a half dozen heads swivel to follow the sound of her voice. The accent was on the *fuk* at the end. It was pronounced like the Anglo-Saxon word.

"What are you talking about?" I sputtered, coffee dribbling down my chin.

"You know, making love to her. Or do Terrans just call it fucking?"

"I know what a *sorn'fuk* is," I said urgently, lowering my voice. Everyone was staring at us now.

"So, did you?"

"We're not having this conversation," I said firmly. I was suddenly very aware of Myra's age.

"Oh, come on, Ben. She's a healthy woman, barely into her third century, and Dad is well past the age where things work. She told us she granted you a Kiral'ing. What else could you possibly have been doing all weekend?"

I said nothing.

"Well, then how about this one, Ben. Mom asked me to talk to you about your helping us out a bit here. She can't ask you herself because she owes you. Paris has too much of an attitude to ask anyone anything. Klara is too wrapped up in her little religion, and Aayla is off in her never-never land. So it's all up to me."

"McCloud's Angels," I hazarded as I used my napkin.

"So you've heard what they call us, huh?"

"Pretty hard not to, Myra. You guys are always in the news. Now, what's this help you need?"

"Maybe more of a favor. But given that you lived a long time on Earth, you might think it's kind of a weird. Outside the norms."

I smiled. "O.K. I think you've got my attention now." I tried to imagine things that an Arion would think were outside of Terran social norms.

She twirled a strand of raven hair nervously in her fingers. "The situation is this, Ben. We've got a rather unique genetic legacy here. Yet we're outcasts and illegals anywhere else. The Vels were about to sanitize my mother when she came here, and the Arions, hell, they would take Mom apart just to see what Aphrod'ite did to her."

I looked levelly at her as I took another sip.

"I'd probably wind up with a job as a 'living battery' as Mom calls it, the men lining up to get their daily charge."

I winced. That was a disgusting thought given her freshness and youth.

She turned to stare out the window as she continued. "Aayla, Klara and Paris could of course live on Kryp'terra, except that nobody knows where that planet is."

I set my cup down. "So why don't you just stay hidden here? No need to get mixed up with that centuries-old Supremis war."

Her eyes returned to mine. "That's where the problem lies. We aren't going to live forever. Then our genetic legacy dies out."

My heart leaped. It didn't take a genius to figure out where this was going.

She smiled cutely as she saw the look in my eyes. "But now you are here. Your legacy is interesting, Ben. Human/Velorian enhancement. Good for diversity as you have gobs of junk DNA floating around in your genes. All humans do. Portions of that DNA would get turned on at random during conception to add further diversity to our genes."

"Yeah, junk DNA, that's what I'm all about. Ask anyone," I said sourly.

"The only problem is that everything we've read says that enhanced humans aren't supposed to be able to father a child with a Supremis. Our invulnerability extends to our ova."

"So how can I help?"

She slumped back in her chair and leaned back to look up at the ceiling, combing her hair back behind her shoulders with her fingers. She took a deep breathe before continuing, clearly nervous now. Her blue eyes returned to settle on mine. "Mom, ah, she collected a few samples. You know. The lab reported that your motility is almost as good as Velorian. They had an accident just trying to keep the sample in a glass vial. She thinks your sperm quality is good enough to do the job, without the huge risk of birth defect that would come from wearing gold during conception. All we have to do is time our ovulation. That and a lot of practice."

My heart was racing now. This conversation was heading in a very interesting direction. Still, I decided to play it cool.

"Practice? Are you really asking what I think you're asking? All of you?"

The look in her face was very serious. "Yes, Ben, I am."

I suddenly felt the way I had when I was first enroute to Velor. Thrilled to death. Thinking I was the luckiest guy in the universe. Especially given my life back on Earth. I'd been the skinny, geeky kid that no girl would look twice at.

Unfortunately, after arriving on Velor, I became the hairy kid with bad skin that didn't fit in. An enhancee, a 'fral'let', which was a synonym for 'fraud' or 'fake'. If it wasn't for Jani'ne, a kinky golden-skinned B-class girl in my math classes who used me to get back at her boyfriend whenever they had one of their fights, I wouldn't have been laid there either.

I blinked away that strange memory. Now a group of superfemmes I hadn't even met wanted me as some kind of group husband. My imagination began to race, my body rising with it. This was even better than anything I'd dreamed about when I was on my way to Velor.

I looked down at my coffee as a more sobering thought burst that growing bubble of excitement. I would be at their beck and call. Standing at stud, more or less. When someone was ovulating, I'd have to rush to her side. Whether I was in the mood or enjoying someone else's company or whatever. I imagined alarms going off in the middle of the night, the holo blaring out: *Ovulation Alert*. I'd leap out of whatever bed I was in and race to another bed to do my good deed.

I definitely hadn't been trained for that kind of job. I wasn't even sure they trained Messengers for this. And if Ann had exhausted me, her more energetic daughters were going to kill me. Everyone undoubtedly a *cteis* virgin to boot.

That thought kicked off another very human fantasy. Deflowering virgins. When I left Earth at 16 years age, that was a common enough boast for the jocks who were actually getting laid. My 16-year-old fascination with that concept flooded back. O.K, maybe I could sacrifice my body for the sake of the race. I mean, there were worse jobs, right?

Like being a Minder.

I looked up to see Myra watching me curiously as my thoughts raced, waiting for some reaction. I decided I'd better stop playing hard to get and go sell myself. I didn't want to repeat my initial mistake with Xara.

"It is true that my enhancement is a good one, Myra. Xara gave a bit too much of herself, if you know what I mean. But I'm not complaining."

"That's what mom said. That you were... impressive."

I tried not to blush, but failed miserably. Girls her age had come on to me as a Minder, but my job had been to redirect that youthful desire into more productive paths. Living on Velor around those Messengers, I'd always felt like a runt. The elaborate games of seduction that Velorian girls seemed to be endlessly amused by hadn't included me. I'd developed an inferiority complex as I heard them talk openly about the men they'd slept with.

She looked down at my lap, really looking through the table, and smiled. I was starting to get hard just by thinking about it. "So is that a yes?" she asked innocently. "I mean, you used to live on Velor, so this wouldn't be all that different."

I wet my lips. This was not the time to admit my inexperience. It was instead a time to be charming.

"If your sisters are even half as beautiful as you, any man would consider it an honor."

What the hell was I saying? I wasn't volunteering for anything.

Her skin turned even pinker. "I'm the ugly duckling, remember? Not some superblonde."

Despite my confusion, I couldn't help but smile at her depreciating nature. "To be honest, I'm a little tired of walking around in a sea of paleness."

It wasn't strictly true, but it seemed the right thing to say. What I didn't say was the dangerous beauty of the forbidden Primes had haunted my dreams for some time now. And a chance to get to know someone linked so tightly to the Old Ones was even more exciting.

She smiled as brightly as the rising sun. I'd obviously said the right thing. "Which goes to prove that you really aren't Velorian. How very nice."

I was on a roll. "So, assuming I go along with this mission of yours, Myra, how is this supposed to work? There are four of you."

She pulled out a sheet of paper. "I've worked a schedule out based on our current ovulation cycles. One week with each of us, time enough to get our ovulation routines stabilized. We Supremis have some control over that as you know. That's a month running, unless Mom wants in. You just keep making the

rounds. Mom thinks we should each have at least four kids, spaced three years apart."

I took a long sip of my Espresso. My hand was shaking as I set it down. Sixteen children? I'd never given serious thought to having any children, what with my transplant to Velor and then my Minder job. Was this now going to be my life's work? Being a father?

I cleared my throat, trying to think of something to say in response. "Ah, and I suppose this last weekend with your mother was the interview?"

I winced. Damn, that came out sounding stupid.

Myra laughed girlishly. "Well, it didn't start out that way. Just her way of thanking you in a way she thought you'd appreciate. You'd been mumbling in your sleep about Protectors before you came back around. So she put on that old uniform to impress you."

A drawback to lucid dreaming. I always talked in my sleep.

"But you surprised her instead. You know, with your... skills." She paused to watch the look in my eyes, then shrugged. "I mean, not like a Messenger or anything, but she called us all up and we decided to make you this offer. If you accept, you can start tomorrow. Klara will be in town. Her annual review with the bankers, so to speak." She smirked as she set a white envelope on the table.

Messengers. Always those damn references to Messengers. Same as back on Velor. Didn't these superfemmes realize the emasculating effect that had on lesser men?

Lesser men? Now I was saying it. No, I wasn't going to play this game. Not this time. I slowly leaned back in my chair and tried to look disinterested. For the first time in my life, I was holding all the cards.

"Whoa. I haven't said I'm actually accepting anything, Myra. And I don't even know your sisters."

She looked blankly at me with this 'deer in the headlights' look. Like she couldn't believe I was even debating the offer. "You didn't know me an hour ago either, Ben. But I think we're getting along fine."

"Let's just say that if I do this, Myra, I do it my way. None of this week here, week there stuff. I decide where I... go, depending how I feel and how my mood is." I had been about to say 'where I work', but that sounded way too clinical.

"You mean, you decide each day who you want to sleep with that night?"

"Something like that. And it's not necessarily going to be every night." I thought of beer and shooting pool. My other passions. Hobbies that could be indulged on any world that humans had settled.

She looked angry now. "And what if it's not equal time? What if it doesn't match our ovulation cycle? We can control our cycles to some degree, but not to the day."

"Life is never equal," I said with a shrug, finding that I was enjoying having a little power of my own. "And we'll eventually hit the right day."

It was Myra's turn to slump back in her chair, eyeing me warily. Clearly this conversation wasn't going the way she'd expected it. "I don't like it. Not at all. Aayla will just twist you around her fingers. Claim you for her own."

"Why is that?"

"She's the oldest, so she always gets her way. She can even look any way she wants. No man can resist her."

"You'd be surprised what I can resist. Remember that I grew up on Velor. Plus I've got a special talent. Pheromones only work on me if I want them to."

Her eyes opened wide. "So Mom was right about that too."

I was on a roll now. "So I'm not interested in any envelopes. What I am interested in is whether you are free tonight?"

Myra frowned and looked away. "You're just saying that to be nice. Who would want me? The kid sister? The one with just Arion genes?"

I realized at that moment that she'd come to this meeting with her own fears and insecurities. Insecurities I'd been playing callously with just like those girls back on Velor used to tease me. She was alone and isolated here, the only Arion other than her nearly thousand-year-old father. Even her mother had a lot of Velorian DNA. And her sisters were Kryp'terrans, the closest thing to goddesses outside the Galen.

My little bubble of burgeoning ego collapsed like a punctured balloon. I suddenly felt like an ass.

"You had the courage to come here and confront me, Myra. And that trick with the bridge span and those posts wasn't so bad. And I think you're beautiful."

Myra kept her back to me. "Reserve that judgment until you meet my sisters."

"I'm a sucker for dark hair." A little white lie. "Besides, I'm not interested in meeting your sisters. I have eyes only for the wonder of Aria. For one who can claim her heritage back to the Old Ones."

She slowly turned back to look at me, her eyes sparkling beneath hair that nearly hid her face. She laughed softly, a beautiful, tinkling laugh. "Except I'm also the youngest."

"Which makes you charmingly unaffected." I didn't know how else to answer that.

She brushed the hair from her eyes. Eyes so bright and eager. "Does that mean you want to fuck me?"

I stared at her in shock. Despite her crude question, the look in her eyes so innocent and pure. She looked so Terran, but her no-nonsense attitude toward sex was definitely Arion.

She saw the blank look in my face. "You know, *sorn'fuk*?" She glanced around the crowded coffee shop. "I mean, this isn't the best place, but we could slip out back." She looked back at me with those eager, blue eyes. "If you want, I mean."

I wanted that more than anything in my life, but she was too young. Still, my thoughts were spinning, and the rationalizations began. Unlike before, she wasn't one of my charges. Nobody even knew this world existed. I'd held myself back for years around girls like her. She owed me. I was the only guy on the planet who could make love to her.

The rationalizations won out over my good sense. "So, you Arions really do grow up fast, don't you, Sergeant."

She laughed. "Oh, so now I'm just Sergeant, huh?"

"I'm a sucker for a girl in uniform."

"I don't have a uniform. Other than the one I was born with."

"As I said," I winked.

It was raining when we went back outside. We ran hand in hand through the puddles, splashing and laughing like children. We'd gone a half dozen blocks when I wrapped my arm tightly around her waist and we flew.

She squealed and giggled like a young girl as I rose straight up like a rocket, thrilled by my levitation. The fascination of every flightless Arion. I landed us as lightly as sparrows on the balcony ledge two hundred stories up. Pure luck. I usually don't fly all that gracefully. Naturally, I promptly tripped and fell off the all to land on top of her on the balcony floor. Better than falling the other way. Two hundred stories is a long way down.

We lay there in the rain, laughing and kissing and tearing the wet clothing off each other. By the time we fell into the bubbling water of the Jacuzzi, I was so ready.

"Oh, my lord," she gasped, as her hand dipped under the surface to find my erection, her long fingers barely wrapping around me. "I had no idea a man could be so..." Her voice trailed off as she held me with both hands, the water bubbling around me, her touch so gentle, as if she was afraid to hurt me.

"I'm not a Frail, Myra." I held her hand and squeezed it with all my strength.

Her eyes grew big, and she gasped. Then I did, as she held me a great deal of her Primal strength. Testing me. Far from hurting, it felt so incredible, especially as she began to kiss her way down my chest, my stomach, murmuring something about "my superman."

Her kisses soon found that most super part of me, teasing me. I tried to lift her up, wanting to take her in a way that no Ordinary could, but she slipped from my grasp to duck under the water. She drew me in, her lips and tongue working their magic. She was good, as in 'not even close to her first time' good, and I came with a power that would have injured a lesser woman.

She was smiling as she came back up from under the hot water. I lay gasping in pleasure against the side of the tub. She looked as if she'd just tasted the finest nectar, and it occurred to me that this was probably the only kind of sex she'd ever known. Living on a world of Ordinaries and all.

I was suddenly determined to reward her attentions in a way only I could. Full on. Fortunately, my recovery time was almost as good as a Messenger's, which means that I'm ready to go again in two minutes flat. I was very full of myself as I lifted her out of the water, holding the rounded curves of her backside as I lowered her trembling form over my proud manhood.

She wrapped her legs around me and held me tightly as I started to enter her, her fingers digging painfully into my shoulders. "Slow... go slow, oh please, not that slow, oh, yes, just go on, harder, oh, now, faster..." she cried out like a confused virgin.

Not yet a woman in all ways.

I did as she asked, more or less. Not that I could do anything else. She was incredibly tight. I didn't know anything about deflowering virgins, but I'd read somewhere that the art is in gradually advancing, retreating, and then giving her body a chance to recover. She would be feeling entirely new sensations, not all of them pleasant at first.

Well, you can forget that last part. It doesn't apply to Arions. Her enthusiasm gathered energy like a summer thunderstorm. Lightning and all. When the obstacle of her maidenhood presented itself, located deeper than any human could find it, guarding the entrance to her *cteis*, the inner vagina of a Supremis, her long legs tightened around my hips. I grabbed her ass with all my strength, both of us straining against each other. The thin membrane stretched inside her, and I felt a sharp, stabbing pain shoving back up into my groin from the enormous pressure, but I was so turned on by her increasingly excited cries that I didn't dare think about the titanic forces involved. She desperately poured every ounce of her superhuman strength into those gorgeous legs of hers into my body, her heels digging painfully into my ass as she screamed in pain/passion so loudly that the overhead windows shattered into a waterfall of broken glass. She launched me backward and we landed hard on her back on the cold floor, glass fragments pulverizing beneath her steel-hard skin. I used all my flight power to thrust into her, and the marble shattered beneath her back.

She screamed out in passionate pain and I was suddenly freed. Falling headlong into the insanity of her first full on sex, she couldn't seem to get enough of the feel of me all the way inside her, her body soaring and then exploding in desire to take me on the dizzy journey with her. Our enthusiasm eventually collapsed the walls of the Jacuzzi, a wave of hot water washing us across the floor. Even then, she didn't slow down as she found new positions and discovered new pleasures every moment.

She was definitely a woman now.

Too much woman as it turned out. My eyes began to blur as my body suddenly ran out of energy. The world disappeared into a black haze.

When I woke up, Myra was standing across the room by a large mirror that was all steamed up from her shower. An actinic blaze of light from her eyes reflected from the glass to dry her long hair in mere seconds. Obviously a very practiced gesture. I lifted my head from the pillow as she slipped into a pair of jeans and a green top. She looked incredibly cute.

"So, my superman awakes. I didn't hurt you did I?"

"You were incredible, Myra," I said with undisguised enthusiasm. "Sorry if I conked out on you. When I run out of energy, it's like turning out a lamp. No warning."

She danced across the room to straddle me on the bed, interlacing her fingers in mine to pin my arms over my head, leaning down to kiss me. "That was the best night of my life, Ben. I never knew it could be so good with a man."

"And I've never been loved with that kind of wildness, Myra." I winked up at her. "Deflowering virgins is obviously dangerous work."

She laughed. "You've just never been with an Arion. Dad says the word Prime comes from Primal. Throwbacks to our barbaric past." She flipped backwards off the bed to land catlike in the middle of the purple and blue Persian rug that decorated my bedroom.

I rose stiffly from the bed to give her an exaggerated bow. "Then I defer to my barbarian lady."

She smiled sexily. "A lady who is ready for her next conquest of steel."

I sagged into a bedside chair. "Let me catch my breath first. And get some energy into me."

"Then we'll satisfy my other passion instead. Get dressed."

I rose wearily to throw on some clothes, and was barely half dressed when she enthusiastically dragged me out the door and down the elevator to find another coffee shop.

"I'm totally addicted," she claimed.

The sign over the door said *Shalimar*. It was a casual place, reminding me of a coffee shop I'd once seen back on Earth while traveling with my folks in Amsterdam. People sat on the floor in the back, pillows all around them, smoking and drinking coffee. The air was thick with the sweetness of marijuana, punctuated by the sharpness of tobacco, the lighting subdued and rosy. Over top of it all was the smell of strong coffee.

We slipped into the crowd of marijuana stoned caffeine addicts, most of them leaning on pillows, some of them reclining to stare up at the ceiling. A highly detailed forest scene decorated the room, murals on the walls depicting mountains and lakes, and a view of the blue sky through trees painted on the ceiling. It wasn't art, but it was impressive.

I found myself sitting next to a heavily pierced girl who was blurry-eyed stoned. She was rocking herself back and forth, chanting something under her breath.

Myra curled up against my back, wrapping her long legs around me, resting her chin on my shoulder as we waited for our Espresso to come. "So who do you like *fuking* better, Ben? Me or my mother?"

The pierced girl overheard, and she turned to stare at me, then at Myra, who just laughed. I lowered my voice. "Did you see that look you just got?"

"Then answer my question and I won't embarrass you further."

I dropped my voice to a whisper as I twisted around to face Myra, leaning close to touch my forehead to hers. Her legs were still around my waist, her heels digging into my lower back to hold us close. "O.K. If I had to describe her, I'd say she was hungry, even desperate. Like she'd been saving herself up for decades."

"And me?"

"You were so sweet. Simple and unaffected. Open and passionate. Fresh. Primitive. Loving. Warm. Comfortable." I shrugged. "I guess cause we're closer to the same age."

"Comfortable?" she repeated, left eyebrow raising.

"It was weird with your mom. I couldn't help but keep thinking of her age."

"She's not even three hundred yet."

"And you are what, barely 16? Only last month?"

"So? As you said yourself, we Arions grow up fast."

"That's my point. We're not that different in age. What's ten years when we're going to live for centuries?"

The Espresso came. Myra reached to the side to pick up her cup from the bench, taking a long sip of the bitter brew. Her luminous eyes remained focused on mine. "That was my first time, Ben. Inside like that. *Cteis*."

I nodded, not knowing how to respond. She'd clearly been far too strong for any Ordinary to make it with her as deeply as that.

"How many women have you slept with, Ben? Other than my mom and the Protector who enhanced you?"

"What's that got to do with..."

"You don't have to pretend with me, Ben."

Could she read minds or something? "Plenty."

"One. Right?"

My worldly bravado collapsed. How could she know? I sighed and leaned back against some pillows. "Just Jani'ne. A Velorian." I felt like I was confessing a great sin.

"I thought so. You're going to need more practice with me before you meet my sisters. Lots more."

"I don't... I mean, I haven't... I don't need..." I saw several men looking strangely at me. "You're telling me I need practice? This coming from a girl who was a virgin a few hours ago?"

Myra nodded solemnly, trying to keep a straight face. She looked so demure and innocent, so human, but she was definitely Arion at the core. Sexual competitiveness was never far from the surface. "My skills comes with my genes. You have to learn yours."

A thrill raced through my body, making me smile even brighter. "Well, I guess I've always wanted a personal trainer." The thought of Myra as a *sorn'fuk* trainer was mind-bending.

"Then kiss me, you fool."

I did. The Espresso was forgotten as we stumbled out the back door into the alley, tearing at each other's clothes again. She was still wearing her jeans, and only her jeans, as she straddled me. The tough denim tore like tissue paper as she lowered herself over me. She fucked me with such enthusiasm that the stone paving bricks shattered beneath my back. I struggled to roll her over to return the favor, unable to resist the insanity of her pheromones any longer. All that smoke in the coffee shop had done something to me.

I vaguely remember the back wall of the shop collapsing sometime later, bricks raining down on us. I also recall plowing a trough through the paving blocks with her back, then through the wall of the next building, collapsing it with a flurry of frantic thrusts.

I finally had the good sense to get us airborne, and we flew through rain-filled clouds, the lightning attracted to our dense bodies, teasing us with millions of volts. We landed on top of a mountain summit in the middle of a storm, and I were lucky enough to take a direct strike while we were very close to a peak of ecstasy. The bolt traveling from my body to hers through that intimate pathway. Her orgasm soared to the next level, at least until the summit rocks shattered beneath her back to send us tumbling over a half-mile high cliff. We landed hard in the boulder field far below.

Myra giggled excitedly as I managed to get us airborne again. She pointed this way and that, guiding me toward her favorite beach. We landed in the soft, white sand, experimenting with the grittiness, inside and out. Being Arion, she decided she liked it, but I didn't.

I took us out to sea, and we swam and made love with the dolphins as I carefully washed the sand away. The entire pod went crazy around us. Did Supremis pheromones work on dolphins too?

We finally returned downtown to continue our loving on the top of my building. She laughed and hung upside down off the transmission tower as I tried to fly well enough to make love to her in that position. Sort of like a bumblebee trying to harvest pollen from a flower. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm got the best of us, and we fell from the tower to crash through the glass ceiling of the nightclub on the other side of the building from my penthouse. We landed beside the drummer, *fuking* to 120-decibel music, the stage smoke billowing around us.

No matter how wild and kinky our night got, Myra never wanted me to slow down, she never grew tired or sore, she always wanted more. Like most girls her age, she was indefatigable, caring nothing for what other people saw or thought.

Unfortunately, sometime just before dawn, my body ran out of gas again. I had no idea how many times we'd made love. All I know was that it was the wildest night in my life.

Chapter Three

I'm not completely sure how I got home after that. I do know that I slept alone the next day and night.

I realized now that Myra was only the first of what were going to be a series of *cha'lays*, the act of deflowering a virgin female. Given that we're talking about a hymen made of nearly invulnerable tissue, it would have been easier to penetrate armor plate.

Which I once did to convince Princess Cara, on the aptly named Cara's World, that I wasn't really her type. She'd made a lot of money doing music holos and had bought a planet. She thought it would be a wild turn-on to date a superman, so she sent this Scalantran ship to fetch me. She didn't like me telling her that she was too frail for me to make love to.

The Princess was not impressed, and banned me from her world.

Such were my strange memories this morning.

I turned on the holo, and was immediately confronted by some very revealing footage of Myra and myself. I gasped as one explicit scene unfolded -- the back stage of that rock concert. Millions of people had just watched me proudly transform this lovely McCloud girl into a woman. We were the top story on the news!

My human sensibilities returned and I leaped up to turn the holo off. I couldn't believe they were showing such things. I was tingling and blushing and embarrassed and angry as I walked back into the living room. The broadcasting rules that I'd always hated on Earth suddenly seemed like a good idea.

A wax-sealed envelope was hanging out of my leather bag. How did that get there? I tore it open. Inside was a note saying that I was to meet Klara, and an address at some bank. A folded up street map was attached.

Damn it. Not already.

But I'd promised.

I knew from long experience not to try to follow one of those street maps from the air. Things always looked different up there. Instead, I took the elevator to street level and waved down a cab.

The cabbie dropped me off in front of a large building in the center of downtown. The words above the door weren't in a language I knew, but it definitely looked like a bank. I walked through the front door and asked for Klara McCloud. The cute young thing at the receptionist's desk looked startled. I asked again and she made a phone call, whispering about the "McCloud man".

An attractive older woman with mousy brown hair soon arrived to look me up and down. She didn't offer me her hand. "I'm Saran Lightfoot. What business do you have with Klara McCloud at my bank?"

"My business is my own," I replied, trying to remain polite.

"Well, I hope you are going to set her straight. That self-avowed little goddess thinks she can come in here and meddle in things that are none of her business."

"What kinds of things?" I didn't like the sound of this.

"Feeding the poor. Sharing the wealth. She calls it leveling the playing field. She has all kinds of euphemisms for theft. But what it comes down to in the end is criminal behavior."

I glanced over at the cute young thing behind the desk. She was staring dreamy-eyed at my pants. I remembered the newscast, and felt myself blush. Saran saved me by heading off across the lobby. I followed her through a doorway and down a long corridor and finally through a massive vault door. The steel inner walls had a faintly purplish cast. Vendorian? Unlikely given Sanctuary's technology, unless the Galen had left a database on seeded worlds that gave instructions on some aspects of beyond-Earth technology. But quality Vendorian steel could only be made in zero gravity.

I was about to ask Saran about that when we turned another corner, and I found myself facing a dozen heavily armed policemen. Great, I thought. What have I gotten myself into now?

"He's a friend of Miss High and Mighty," Saran said flippantly to the police Captain.

"Exactly what kind of friend?" the Captain asked me, eyes narrowing.

"That's my business." I wasn't about to tell him that I'd never met Klara.

He aimed a scanner at me. "He's just human." The other policemen relaxed. I wasn't sure if I should be relieved or insulted. Most scanners concluded that I was Velorian.

"Your scanner is useless," Saran said sharply. "Just like those puny weapons you've brought. He's enhanced. Are you too incompetent to even watch the news? Probably too busy eating donuts or hustling hookers."

"So, what's an enhanced human male doing consorting with McClouds?" the Captain asked, his voice still professional despite her insinuations.

"Are you completely dense?" Saran said depreciatingly. "What other man on this planet could..."

"...help me keep you fat cats from lining your own pockets," a strong feminine voice interrupted from behind me.

I turned to see a blonde woman approaching down the hallway, her feet barely brushing the floor. She was extremely tall, very slender, and dressed in something that resembled a Protector's uniform. A pair of red boots made her legs look incredibly long. She wore a skintight blue top, but with no insignia. Her eyes flashed a mesmerizing blue as she paused to face Saran, standing a head taller than her.

Saran wasn't intimidated. "So, the ultimate thief, Klara McCloud, returns to rip off my bank again."

Klara turned to look at the smooth steel wall of the safe. "Supersteel this year, I see. That must have cost you a pretty penny."

"Not even you can open it this time," Saran said proudly.

Klara ran her hands over the steel wall before turning to face Saran. "Don't count on that."

"If your poor people want a better life, Klara, then tell them to work for it."

"With your laws and your taxes? You take everything from them anyway."

"I'm not going to argue politics with you," Saran said coldly.

"Good. Then why don't you punch in the combination to avoid my making a mess of your pretty new vault?"

"I will not help you steal, Klara. You can't open it anyway."

"Steal? Your money belongs to the people," Klara said haughtily. "I'm just here to ensure its fair and proper annual distribution to the poor."

Saran stood her ground. "This is illegal, Klara. I've brought the police this year. If you do this, these officers will be compelled to arrest you."

Klara laughed. "Look up the law, Saran. Congress granted we McCloud's immunity years ago."

I glanced at the cops. They weren't drawing their weapons. Instead, they were behaving more like spectators, eyes big, mostly just staring at Klara's legs.

"The Senate is considering passing new laws," Saran snapped back at her. "Retroactively."

"They won't," Klara said with a toss of her blonde hair. She looked at the policemen. "This is your last chance to prevail upon this deranged woman, Captain, and prevent a lot of expensive property from being destroyed."

The Captain glanced at both women before stepping back. "It's not my call to make. Miss McCloud has a historical claim on interest earnings from certain accounts. That money is in this vault. Your vault, Mrs. Lightfoot. However, you have a right to determine the time and place of its disbursement."

"Disbursement? There will be no disbursement," Saran hissed through clenched teeth. She crossed her arms and glared daggers at Klara.

Klara rolled her eyes at the Captain. "Right. About as I expected." She turned around to face the vault door. "Time to do this the McCloud way." She grabbed the handle while bracing her left knee against the thick door, and pressed the fingers of her other hand against the faintly purplish steel just above the handle. She began to pull. Her back suddenly looked very strong.

A few moments later the steel door gave off high-pitched squeal that was followed by a riot of small pops as the handle bent slightly. Klara pulled harder yet, and the door began to give off a horrible groan. The groan rose into a deafening scream as the handle slowly bent, the door bulging outward with it. My jaw fell open. For all the Primal strength Myra had displayed, Klara's power was something else entirely.

The purplish steel began to flare white-hot where the handle was attached, a clear indication that it was indeed Vendorian steel. Stress ripples appeared in the door. The entire building seemed to give off a low groan now. Klara didn't even seem to be working all that hard as she turned to look at me.

A Protector wouldn't even dream of performing such a feat. Even a massively muscular Virago would be hard pressed to bend Vendorian steel even half this thick. Yet Klara was model thin and she was doing it easily. By any physics or genetics I understood, what I was watching should have been impossible.

The door unfortunately didn't understand the impossibility of its own destruction. It was soon hanging crookedly on its mangled hinges, locking bolts sheared and bent, the thick door itself bent nearly in half. Klara walked inside to rummage around before returning with a huge pallet of platinum bars over her head. About twenty tons worth I'd guess. She marched down the hallway to kick open the locked door at its end; her long legs still a wonder to my eyes.

By the time I followed the cops outside, she was gone. She hadn't even acknowledged my presence other than during her opening comment.

I was wondering what to do next when a young boy walked up to tug on my sleeve. He handed me an envelope. He said the 'flying lady' gave it to him to give to me.

The paper inside described a location that was four thousand miles away. A tropical island.

I'm not that fast in an atmosphere, so it took me nearly eight hours of flying to get there. I descended through mid-afternoon tropical rain clouds to see a beautiful island with sandy beaches. There were a series of buildings in the middle of a jungle of palm trees, the construction suggesting a temple of some kind. Spiraling towers with low stone buildings lay in between, the walls covered with stone carvings. Dozens of monks wearing black robes were walking around, some of them chanting.

I landed on the beach just outside the palm trees and opened my pack to get dressed. For obvious reasons, it's easiest to fly naked, especially since my top speed is close to the Mach. A pair of shorts and a brightly colored t-shirt were enough for the tropics. I buried my bag in the sand. Remaining barefooted, I followed one of the paths inward.

A young monk met me at the edge of the temple complex. "You are here to worship the Goddess?" he asked.

I didn't like the sound of that. Both Myra and the woman at the bank had said something about Klara's religion, but neither had suggested that Klara *was* the religion.

The monk smiled angelically as I nodded, then turned to lead me toward the center of the complex. Artwork and sculptures lined the narrow alley. They were almost Hindu in appearance. Mostly phallic and fertility symbols. Some of the larger phallic symbols were made of steel, and most of them had a slightly misshapen and melted look to them. They became more numerous and larger as we approached the central spire. The ones closest to the central temple would have intimidated a Messenger.

I was finally ushered through a triangular door into a large room. The walls were made of red brick with stained glass windows set in them. It looked like the inside of a Christian church. Hardly what I'd expected to find in the middle of this obviously pagan temple. Shockingly, a huge phallic symbol hung overhead. It must have been ten feet long and anatomically accurate for an erection.

Klara was standing in front of the altar, eyes nearly closed, her head tilted as if in a trance. She was wearing a different style of red and blues now. Bare midriff, black leather pants and jacket, her top adorned with the archaic Supremis symbol. Sexy, but in a street punk kind of way. It definitely wasn't a divine outfit.

I debated how I was supposed to greet someone who considered herself a goddess but was dressed like this, and finally went with something antiquated but hopefully proper.

"Hello again, Lady Klara," I said with a little bow.

"Only my mother and sisters call me that name. Or that evil witch at the Bank of Sanctuary." Her eyes didn't open, and her voice was cold, almost bitter. "You are not of them."

"I think you made that pretty clear at the bank today, Klara. I'm surprised they didn't arrest me for just knowing you."

She tilted her head upright and opened her eyes to look at me. They glowed purplish blue, dissecting me like a laser. "I've shared their misbegotten wealth with the poor every year since I was ten. They keep moving their money around, so I have to find their new location each year."

"What are you? A Robin Hood type of character?"

"Robin who?"

"Sorry. An old Earth myth. Steal from the rich to support the poor."

"That is what I do," she nodded. "Except it's not stealing to return stolen money to its rightful owners. Stolen by improper interest rates. Usury."

"Seems like they should save their expensive vaults and just change how the system works."

"Too logical for Sanctuarians."

"And here I thought you guys had things figured out on your little world."

"Hardly. Which brings us to you. Have you come to my island to worship me?"

"Hasn't Myra or your mother contacted you?"

Klara sighed, her stately manner deflating. She waved Myra's envelope. "Bearing a child. Saving the race and all that bullshit. How much is my mother paying you for this shit?"

I cringed inside as she reverted to talking like a girl from the streets. It burst whatever was left of my image of a stately and all-caring goddess. "This isn't about money, Klara. It's not even my idea. But I've agreed to help."

"Help?" she laughed. "How can you help? No man's weakness could ever defile my beauty. I can only be worshipped with the perfection and purity of steel."

The polished and half-melted phallic symbols all over the place suddenly made sense. Plus all the monks who were busy making more. I had a vision of some very kinky religious ceremonies. Clearly this little religion of Klara's was intended solely to serve her excessive sexual needs. Yet there was nothing remotely human about the way she was undertaking that quest.

"Men are useless and hopelessly soft," she added, effectively ruining any hope I had of creating a mood. "Unclean too."

Her attitude was really starting to piss me off now. If not for my promise to Myra, I'd turn and walk away. Instead, I gave her back a little of my own attitude.

"Yet you play with the softness of mere steel? How pathetic for someone born Kryp'terran."

"It's Supersteel," she said proudly. "It is beyond the power of anyone but a Supremis to bend."

"Yet it is formed by ordinary men and their torches and tools. There are far stronger things in this universe."

She rose to her feet to stand a half a head taller than me in her heels. "You dare challenge the perfect purity of the goddess with mere flesh and blood?"

"I'm not mere, by anyone's imagination, Klara, and that steel of yours is far from the hardest thing in the universe. Trust me on this." My ego was inflating again. Ann and Myra had given me confidence.

"I told you, that is not my name. Here I am merely Goddess."

"What you are is a sex starved half-Velorian bitch, Klara. This entire island, this so-called religion of yours, it's all just a pitiful substitute for a man."

I knew I was pushing it, but she'd pissed me off. And when I'm pissed, my mouth always gets me in trouble.

She stepped closer, fists clenching, muscles standing out like steel cables, an array of angry emotions crossing her face. I wasn't sure if she was going to scream or cry, or whether she was going to knock me halfway to the moon or kiss me. She did none of those things. Instead, she unleashed her heat vision.

She had very powerful eyes, and the flare of thousands of degrees hurt like hell as it burned down the front of my body. But I didn't flinch. Never show fear in front of an attacker, I'd been told. Except I wasn't sure if this was an attack or some kinky type of foreplay.

I heard a soft gong sounding in the distance, but didn't have time to wonder what that was before her focus found my rising ardor. Her eyes heated me like a poker in a blacksmith's forge. Pain turned to sublime pleasure as my hormones soared, inspired by her heat and her dangerous beauty. I became the superman that I am.

She blinked her eyes back to normal and just stared down at me, licking her lips, obviously surprised. I wasn't nearly as large as her most outrageous phallic symbols, but they would have melted under her assault. I was anything but melted.

She walked around me, her intense expression reminding me of a hungry cat about to pounce on a rat.

Ok, so maybe it was foreplay. Either that or she was cooking her lunch!

When she returned to face me, she shrugged her jacket off, revealing that the blue uniform left her shoulders bare. She looked surprisingly strong considering her slenderness. She slipped her thumbs under the waistband of her leather pants, and effortlessly sliced them down to her ankles, shreds of black leather flying everywhere. Standing back up, naked now except for her Supremis top, she stood close enough for my arousal to brush erotically against her flat stomach. Moving sensuously, she lifted her hands to my shoulders, and tried to push me down.

I held my ground, and instead tried to kiss her. She leaned her head back and increased the pressure on my shoulders to enormous levels, using her flying power to keep herself rigid. Her hair swirled wildly around her head as the stone under my feet started to crack noisily. Her strength was utterly shocking, the pressure so great that my knees began to shake, then bending as she slowly drove me to my knees.

I wasn't thrilled by her using brute strength to overpower me this way, obviously assuming I was going to pleasure her. But, by God, her legs were beautiful. I couldn't help myself as I began kissing my way up those long legs. She rewarded me by lessening her grip on my shoulders, and the sculpted steel of her legs softened to silky softness. She opened them slightly, inviting my kisses inward. Her skin carried the faint taste of chocolate accented with honey and a touch of saltiness. But it was the musk and wildflower scent that drew me toward the stronger sweetness of her naked arousal. Her skin was so smooth and warm, almost like it was slightly oiled.

She grew impatient as I slowly kissed my way upward, tangling her fingers in my hair to hold me roughly to her sex. I gently parted her with my tongue, tracing upward through the musky nectar, that strange hint of chocolate intriguing me. I finally arrived at that nub of her infinite pleasures.

She stiffened and cried out softly as I traced my tongue around it. She hugged my face to herself with a desperate strength, her body vibrating with unrequited desire. It was all I could do to draw that nub between my lips to hold it, my tongue flicking far faster and stronger than any Ordinary could manage. Her body felt like a volcano building toward a cataclysmic explosion, quivering violently with earthquakes of barely restrained desire. Thrilled by my power over her, and wanting to remove all restraint, I gently closed my teeth and held her tightly, vibrating my tongue even faster.

She screamed and her body seemed to explode. I felt myself flying, then crashing into the far wall to be half buried by a shower of broken stone. I shook myself off as I got slowly back to my feet, only to have her tackle me, tangling her long legs tangle up in mine. I fell to the marble floor as she spun around lithely to land on her feet, straddling my face. I looked up between those long legs and saw heaven itself. Above heaven, I saw her red and blue top glowing beneath her tousled blonde hair, and knew she was the most desirable woman I'd ever seen.

Klara smiled softly as she turned away to walk slowly around the perimeter of the room. She knew the effect she was having on me. Her nipples were so big now, tenting her top, her body fully aroused. The monks gathered around her, tracing their fingers along the 'S' before kissing one hard nipple. I watched her little ceremony with amusement. She was clearly getting off on the concentration of male hormones in the room. These monks were anything but celebrate, even if she was inviolate as far as they were concerned.

She finally returned back to face me, wrapping her hands around the length of my erection. She lifted me straight up, by body weight hanging from her grip. The monks started to hum something. I looked uncomfortably down at the monks, realizing that part of me had just become the newest icon in her religion.

It was kinky as hell, but what the hell, this ceremonial crap was doing wonders for me. I was huge. Partly it was her challenge to my manhood, but mostly the fact that she was so exotically beautiful. A Kryp'terran who favored her Galen side. Who thought she was a goddess.

Her tousled hair fell silkily over me as she leaned forward and kissed me soulfully, then guiding herself to me. She remained in control, slowly guiding me to herself as the monks began to hum. I impatient thrust upward into her engulfing warmth; only to find that she was astoundingly tight. I closed my eyes as she began to breath hard as she lowered herself over me, finally giving herself up to her *fuking*.

The humming grew louder, and I opened my eyes to see the monks gathered around us in a tight ring. A half dozen of them were caressing her again, touching breasts, back, face, and hair. I spread my arms and tucked my fingers into two cracks in the stone floor to brace myself. One of the monk's hands found her nipples, expertly teasing her huge nipple beneath her red and blues. It was erotic and it was obscene and it made her go wild.

Of course, the hotter she got, the tighter she held me inside her. Much, much tighter, finally trapping me at full stroke. She opened her eyes and stared down at me, smiling like a tigress gloating over her prey, her body quivering and eyes fluttering as the first brush of orgasm teased her.

"No... no man can withstand... my power," she whispered hoarsely. "The gift... of power... power of a true... Goddess!"

I threw myself against her, managing to move a few inches deeper, and her words ended in a scream as she suddenly stiffened, her mouth opening in a perfect O. I tore my fingers from the stone to reach up and hold her tightly. No Ordinary should be this close to a Supremis during orgasm. I shouted for the monks to run as I felt the freight train of own desires approaching. No stopping now.

"Klara, you've got... got to wrap your legs around me. Hold me... hold me tight. Otherwise the... consummation fires... hormones... monks..."

I struggled desperately to roll her over on her back, but the powerful muscles that were holding the length of me began to ripple inside, vaporizing the last shreds of my self-control. That wondrous chilling buzz of total release exploded inside me as she began to sing, her voice rising in half scream, half music, growing so loud that it shook the small tower.

I was barely aware that her legs weren't wrapped around me, a requirement to contain the shared hormonal conflagration inside her body. Then the insanity washed over me as I came in a gigantic rush, and the heat of Supremis hormonal annihilation exploded deep inside her body. The world turned nuclear white around me.

When I came to, I found myself lying in a depression of half molten granite. The walls of the tower were gone, as were the monks. Everything for a hundred meters was either shattered, or melted and drooping.

She'd not contained our loving heat!

I saw Klara walking along the beach as if in shock. As soon as she saw me moving, she launched herself toward me, landing on top of me.

"Fuck you, you human bastard, fuck you. My monks are all dead. My home destroyed. All because of you. Fuck you, fuck you..."

The vehemence of her words and the violence of her attack brought me back to my fullness. She impaled me with a screaming violence that cracked the rock beneath my back; her crude *fuking* sent my senses soaring. Within seconds I was racing toward the next moment of insanity. Except this time, she wrapped those impossibly long legs around me, tightening them in concert with her gasping screams to trap the star-like heat of hormonal annihilation where it belonged.

Which of course fed the fires of her desire all the more. The endless spiral of heat and arousal of the Supremis began.

She screamed and cursed at me all night long, *fuking* my brains out every moment of the way. Her remorse over the death of her monks was replaced by a passion to hurt me, and when she couldn't bring herself to do that, she turned all those jumbled emotions into hot passion. At first, I thought she was trying to fuck me to death. We dueled back and forth trying to steal each others energy, but my ability to withstand the insanity of her pheromones left me enough in control to control her passion, to guide her, and to eventually please her. By morning we were moving in perfect synchronicity, an angelic smile on her lips.

I felt as if I'd just broken a wild mare that had been running free on the range. We ran together for a little while longer until the exhaustion came over me again.

When I woke a second time, she was down on the beach again. This time she was burying her monks in a long common grave. I didn't want to face her now. My body was aching and sore. I needed time to recover. To regain my energy.

That was going to take days this time, not minutes.

I struggled to crack myself free of the nearly solidified marble floor and lifted off as best I could. My first attempt to fly ended with a belly flop in the sand. I spit the sand from my mouth as I picked myself and ran toward the opposite side of the tiny island. I managed to stay airborne on my second attempt. I flew low and slow.

It was a very, very long way home.

(Continued in McCloud's Daughters, Part Two)