

McCloud's Daughters

Part 2

By Shadar with edits by JH

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Graphics: Coldblood, Shadar

Lyrics inspired by Norah Jones song, *"Come away with me"* from the album of the same name.

Chapter Four

Four days later, another envelope arrived through the pneumatic tube, the usual way of transmitting documents on in the city. It instructed me to fly to Paris. Not the city, but the girl.

Myra's note described a surfing hangout on the southern edge of the southwestern continent, fourteen thousand miles from the city. Paris lived there with a community of surfers.

I smiled; imagining a blonde teenager slicing through the water, doing cutbacks and aerials that nobody else could match. Surfing is a sport that every water world has. Gravity can affect wave size to a small degree, but the effects of ocean wavelength, storm energy and bottom topography are far more important. In short, every world where the surface area is more than 30% ocean has at least a few coastlines with outstanding surfing.

I debated taking a commercial flight to the southwestern continent, but I didn't like the idea of being trapped in a metal tube for more than twenty hours. If pressed, I could do a sub-orbital hop. Real Velorians love those. You can get just about anywhere on a planet in less than an hour.

Unfortunately, the re-entry corona was extremely painful for me. I'd end up wind-burned and dehydrated and half deaf for a couple of days. Vels had been born to fly between the stars. I'd been born to walk. Flying was just a borrowed trick.

With the McClouds' cash, I decided to rent one of the local aircraft instead. A single-seater, open cockpit, powered by a rotary engine, it was good for 600 mph at 10,000 feet altitude.

I flew for eight hours before running into parallel lines of tropical thunderstorms. They gradually pushed me higher as I tried to get over them, but eventually the entire horizon ahead of me became a mass of violent storms. The air was too unstable and the flitter too underpowered to go over the top, and the seat wasn't really braced well enough for me to add my own flying power to it, so I circled downward to try to go under them.

I was soon skimming across the white-topped waves, dodging the heaviest rainsqualls, when I flashed over a small island. Recognizing it as the godsend that it was, I circled back to find an unpopulated atoll. I landed the flitter on the sandy beach, and then propped it between two palm trees to form a crude shelter. Five minutes later, a very heavy thunderstorm swept over the island. I sat in my impromptu shelter, luxuriating in the warm tropical rain and the crashing of thunder, proud of my ability to find shelter in the middle of nowhere. I leaned back on the sand, only to have the world around me explode.

I woke up hours later as a dozen hand-sized crabs tried to make a meal out of me. Bits and pieces of the flitter were scattered in all directions. A lightning bolt had hit the flyer, attracted as they often were to the metal frame of the grounded flyer. The shock of the strike and the EM wave it created had knocked me unconscious.

I propped myself up on one elbow and brushed the crabs away. They turned on each other, apparently concluding that I wasn't edible after all. When one of them fell, the rest pounced on it and shredded it in seconds. Cannibalism among crabs. Just like on Earth.

Rising to my feet, I started to look around. The palm tree on the left was shattered from the bolt, the one on the other side still smoking. Overhead, the black clouds had given way to the usual puffy clouds of the tropics. The front had passed.

I suddenly didn't care about the aircraft, or even Paris. My thoughts floated into the bright sky and roamed freely, while I stood full of wonder at it all. Here I was, a guy who'd been born into a modest family in Pennsylvania, USA, Earth, and now I was lying on this deserted tropical island in an empty ocean on a world halfway across the galaxy that nobody had even heard about, watching crabs that hardly differed from Earth's. The parallels I'd found in my travels had never ceased to amaze me. Parallel evolution, or was it all the Galens' work? Or that of an even greater power?

I knew that had to be it. Galen were superhuman, but were still flesh and blood. But flesh and blood beings couldn't have reached all of these worlds and spread life through the galaxy this way. The Galen had to be just another advanced race. Clever technicians, masters of DNA, who had made the Supremis in their image as weaker tools to be used by the masters. Nothing more, despite the way some looked up to them as if they were gods.

If so, who were the Kryp'terrans?

What was their role in all of this?

Klara was the first even partial Kryp'terran I'd met, and she'd astounded me with her overwhelming strength. Yet other than that, she wasn't that much different than a Velorian. An upgraded Protector perhaps.

Yet I'd heard so many wild tales about the Galen. How they could change their shape. How they used all kinds of different pheromones, not just the crude scent of arousal. But I'd seen no sign of that in my brief fling with Klara.

And what about us poor humans?

Ordinaries. Frails. Naves. Earthers. Whatever anyone wanted to call us. Physically weak but full of creativity.

We lived by our brains, not our brawn. Although some would say we lived on our emotions. We couldn't be a further construct of the Galen. Why would they have made us so fragile?

Instead, everything I'd seen convinced me that our genetic heritage had come from another source. The Galen had merely used humans as a convenient genetic platform for their experiments. Maybe they did help us cross the gap from ape to man as the Velorians believed, perhaps they provided some spark. Clearly they had helped transport humans to many other worlds, but so had the so-called Seeders, a race we knew so little about.

Before them were the even more mysterious Galactics. They'd established the navigational beacons around thousands of wormholes. Were the Galens merely the current wave of advanced beings that were interacting with humanity?

And if so, it begged the question of what a Galen's true form was. Perhaps they only looked like humans when they interacted with humans? Or did they actually favor the human form? Maybe they'd enhanced it sufficiently to their liking? Taken on a new shell like a hermit crab.

I pushed those unanswerable questions away as I got up and stretched. A hazard of having some Velorian DNA was that I got stiff really fast. There was a good reason that whenever you saw a Supremis, they were probably doing stretching and flexibility exercises.

A check of the burned-out flutter told me it wasn't going any further. There would be hell to pay when I didn't return it to the rental agency, but I figured Ann could take care of the bill.

I stuffed my backpack with whatever I could salvage, and turned to run toward the water. Just before I reached the edge of the surf, I leaped into the air. In seconds, I felt the familiar shockwave traveling down my body to attach itself to my feet.

Moving at my best speed, transsonic, the second half of my flight went faster than the first. Just thinking about the bigger picture seemed to uplift me.

And I did so like to fly.

The endless ocean horizon eventually turned brown and then white. I dropped lower as I approached a region of coastline where the breakers were piling up in wave after wave, marching out to the sea. You didn't have to be a surfer to see that this was an awesome shore. A deep underwater canyon guided huge waves inward to break on layers of reefs.

In one place, I saw perfect pipeline waves that were easily eighty feet high. Despite being half deafened from the sound of my own slipstream, I could hear and feel the power of the surf from two miles up. This place made the north shore of Oahu on Earth look like flat water.

I free fell most of the way to the ground, coming to a stop a half-mile down the beach from a large collection of huts. Biran'gin'bong was the name of the village according to the note from Myra. I wondered if that really meant something in some language or if was just local surfer lingo.

The warm sand felt good between my toes as I trudged along the beach. Pure white shell sand, hard packed, with coral outcrops along the surf line, and reefs just offshore. Like all premier surf locations, the bottom was a tangle of razor-sharp coral and knife-edged rocks. At least Paris wouldn't have to worry about that. How the Ordinaries coped with it, I had no idea. Probably a lot of stitches.

As I approached the jumbled collection of huts, I left the beach for the cover of the trees and bushes, so I could observe Paris for a bit before she responded to my presence. Some topless girls ran down the beach, laughing. Their lack of clothing distracted me for a moment. I moved closer to the village, only to see that all of the women were bare-breasted.

A nudist surf colony?

I smiled. Sanctuary wasn't as stuffy as I'd first thought.

I circled the periphery of the village, staying hidden in the jungle, until I saw a stunningly cute blonde girl. She was sitting barefoot on a wood deck, her back to an old hut, with a pair of male surfers sitting with her. Her upper body was nude like the others', her golden hair wavy and unbrushed, her eyes a pale blue. Her legs looked long, emphasized by a tiny red skirt and silver belt, blue panties visible beneath. Gold bands surrounded her neck, waist and wrists.

She looked athletic without even moving. She had to be Paris.

Her body was incredible, even given her age and genetics. Her breasts sat high and firm, her nipples large and dark. Her skin was the color of burnished gold, the color dramatic even for a Velorian. Her skin was oiled smooth and flawless.

One of the two men was in his late twenties, the other in his forties, and both were chatting with her as they stared at the enormous waves. Rick and Tommy, I guessed, based on Myra's note. Other surfers from young to old emerged from the huts and gazed out at the building waves, more attracted to them than to Paris.

I couldn't understand that. God, she was beautiful. So beautiful that I was intimidated, despite her girlish looks.

Or maybe it was a delayed reaction to meeting Klara.

The beauty and strength had been there too, but her arrogance had turned our tryst into a dare, and all I had had to do was open myself up to her pheromones and luxuriate in her beauty. By the time I understood her enormous power, I was committed. Loving her had been

an athletic challenge for me, her orgasmic spasms so powerful that I sometimes felt helpless in her arms.

Yet she seemed to draw enormous pleasure from my body, perhaps because for the first time, she wasn't completely in control of her own stimulation.

Could I do the same with Paris and Aayla?

I had only Myra's reservations about Aayla to go by. She thought of her as always having to be in control of everything and everyone.

Paris was supposedly the opposite. A free-spirit. She was also younger, only eighteen, but girls that age had unrealistic expectations of men.

Yet she'd known only the company of ordinary men. How many years of frustration would I uncork when we first made love?

The idea of releasing so much passion revived my pride, and I decided that if I survived Klara I would survive Paris.

I stepped out of the bushes. Tommy and Rick immediately looked my way, their eyes narrowing in a typically male reaction. Except for a quick flicker of her eyes toward me, Paris continued staring out to sea. I could feel the tension building as I walked toward the group. I stopped just outside the wooden deck, and addressed her.

"Hi, Paris. My name is Ben," I said as cheerfully as I could.

She didn't answer.

I looked at the older of the men, holding out my hand. "You're Tommy, right?"

He refused to shake my hand.

I looked at the younger man, but he turned his back to me.

I shrugged and turned back to look at Paris. She lifted an envelope and waved it at me without taking her eyes off the shore.

"Myra told me about you. So helpful that her boyfriend is willing to stand at stud for her poor, deprived little sister."

"Is that what she told you?"

Paris shrugged. "More or less."

"Well, I'm not her boyfriend. And I was told that this arrangement was a consensus."

"Mother dear was very convincing," she said in a mocking tone. "My 'genetic obligation to the future' as she called it." She spit out the word 'obligation' as if it was a dirty word.

"Hey, it's no big thing," I shrugged, trying to play it cool, but not succeeding. Shades of Klara. "I only traveled fifteen thousand or so miles to meet you."

Her head snapped around to face me, her eyes sending a wave of heat washing across my face. "And that makes it right? What exactly am I supposed to do with Tommy and Rick here? Invite them to watch you fuck me?"

"That's up to..." I started to say.

She leaped to her feet in a blur. "God, you are such a slut. So fucking typical for a man who's been living on Velor, although frankly, a human should know better. Don't you think my friends have feelings too? Human feelings? You do remember what they're like?"

Off balance from her anger, I was searching for something to say when she walked over to lean her back against the older man. He wrapped his arms around her narrow waist to hold her.

When he saw me watching him, he boldly lifted his hands to cup her breasts. Paris placed her hands over his and turned to look at me, the two of them clearly sending me a message.

Did Tommy have any idea of the power he was holding? Those warm mounds each contained enough orgone energy to match the power of a nuclear weapon if suddenly released. Enough to vaporize half this coastline. Seen like that, they were a perverse combination of beauty and destructive power. Yet none of that could be going through Tommy's mind. This was much more primal -- marking her body as his territory.

Damn it.

I had to deal with the jealousies and feelings of ordinary humans, also? Three years of Terran high school had taught me how powerful those emotions could become around a high-profile woman like Paris. God, did I know.

I tried again. "Look, Paris, Tommy and Rick too, you guys make the call. I can fly out of here just as easily as I flew in."

"So you're really a Velorian now?" Rick finally spoke up. "I didn't think enhancees could fly."

"No, I'm not a Velorian, but really not a Terran any more either. A bit of a freak, I guess. Some things about me are enhanced. Others aren't."

"Yeah, we read what Paris' little sister wrote," Tommy said, glancing enviously down at me. "Kind of like a Messenger dude."

If the guys hadn't been looking at my shorts with such intensity, I would have laughed. They had a far less favorable opinion of me back on Velor.

"Hardly that. I don't even make it to the wading pool by Velorian standards."

"But you were just like Tommy and Rick once?" Paris asked as she reached out to hug both men to her sides.

I looked at the two strapping surfer jocks. Tanned and muscular. I looked geeky and scrawny compared to them. "More or less," I lied.

"So what's this enhancement thing all about? Mom says it's a retrovirus. Isn't that dangerous?"

I saw the curiosity burning in their eyes, and decided to tell it straight. "That's right, it's dangerous. The main danger is that it's only available at the peak of an extreme orgasm, and outside of contact with the energy field of a living body, it can't live for more than a few milliseconds. It's secreted from a tiny organ at the base of the clitoris. She needs a truly legendary orgasm to release it. Nothing held back. And the tongue and lips are the only way to transfer it alive from one body to another."

"But... that's impossible," Paris burst out, her face turning red. "No ordinary man could be... I mean, you know, right there, that way, at that moment."

Tommy and Rick's fearful looks confirmed that they understood that equally well.

"That's the big catch, isn't it?" I was having fun now, despite my still aching body. I may not look like a surfer dude, but I had my talents.

"But how did you survive?" Tommy asked. "You know, your initial enhancement?"

"I was lucky. Protectors are trained to restrain themselves at that precise moment. They undergo deep hypnosis during their training, so they can fall into this trance under very specific circumstances. They can totally relax their bodies while still orgasming."

"Specific circumstances?" Paris asked.

"Enhancement of the locals is an emergency measure that they are trained to use if the Arions are about to overrun them.

"Now that is some seriously weird shit," Rick added. "Having sex with the soldiers just as you are about to be overrun in battle."

"Well, Protectors have a pretty weird job. And even with all the hypnotic suggestion and training, less than half of Protectors master it well enough to be sure the human will survive."

I wasn't going to tell them that ten percent of those who ingested the retrovirus died during the subsequent fever, although the rate was a lot lower for an enhancee that had been in a long-term relationship with the Protector. Enhancement of anyone else was usually an act of desperation. I wasn't going to complicate things by trying to explain Xara's motivations. Her reasons for enhancing me had nothing to do with desperation. Except maybe to get rid of me. Apparently her part-Galen DNA gave her some special abilities.

Come to think of it, maybe Paris would have them too - but what a chance to take.

"You could train me then?" Paris asked hopefully.

I looked at the longing in her blue eyes. I wanted to say yes. We could practice for days, weeks. That would be fun. She was so beautiful. Instead, I closed my eyes and pushed that enticing thought away. Even my flexible ethics wouldn't allow me to build her hopes up like that. I shook my head. "I probably couldn't survive you either, Paris. Without the hypnotic suggestion, the paradox of your having to let go completely while not losing control would overcome you."

"What about Myra? She's not nearly as strong as me."

"Could work for me. But not with an Ordinary. Not without the hypnosis and training."

I didn't volunteer that the Old Ones had enhanced many humans. There were entire colonies that had been founded by Arion enhancees. On the other hand, I suspected there had been a lot of casualties along the way.

"But she and Mom can be weakened by gold," Paris said hopefully.

"That's the other catch," I said with a shake of my head. "Gold suppresses the retrovirus. You can't be intoxicated during the act."

"Shit! Who in the hell came up with this insanity," Paris cursed angrily, slamming her fist into the deck hard enough to splinter it.

I smiled at her girlish anger. I'd thought much the same when I first read about it. "Presumably the Galen. They built a lot of controls into their creations."

"So my only choice is to have a child with you?" Paris smirked, the disdainful look on her face and the disgust in her voice all too familiar from my days on Velor and Earth.

Her words felt like a slap in the face. My head was flooded again with the familiar twin emotions of inadequacy and anger, which always seemed to be near the surface.

Once again, I was facing a beautiful girl whose attitude screamed that I was some kind of lower life form. And once again the words escaped my mouth before I could think. "If you want to know what a real fuck is, to know what it's like to go all the way, without limits, then yes. Unlike the wimpy make-believe sex that you and your toy boys must..."

I never saw Paris' fist coming. Just an explosion of stars and then blackness.

I don't know how long I was out, but when I woke up, the left side of my face hurt like hell and my eye was badly swollen. It was dark and I was lying on a reed mat inside one of the huts. My clothes were sticky wet with salt water. I reached up to find caked blood on my face. Damn, she'd clocked me.

My last words to her came back to me, and I winced before I gingerly lowered my back to the mat. When was I ever going to learn to keep my mouth shut when I was pissed?

Whenever that inadequacy button was pushed, I freaked out.

When would I get past that?

I sighed and stopped flogging myself long enough to lift my head again and look through the door opening. There was a glow outside. I struggled to get to my feet, but as I tried, the hut spun around crazily. I sagged back to my knees until it steadied, and then took a few deep breaths. I tried again, slowly putting one foot ahead of the other, taking it one shaky step at a time.

Moments later I was standing outside. The stars were bright overhead, the surf was washing gently against the shore. Nobody was in sight except for an older man sitting pensively by a large bonfire. I limped over to sit down hard on the sand beside him.

He looked up at me. It was Tommy. He turned back to study the fire, stirring it with his stick. "That's some shiner you got there, Ben."

"I'm not supposed to be able to get hurt," I groaned. "What did Paris do to me?"

"Hit you so hard that the shock wave knocked Rick and me out. My ears are still ringing. Rick can't hear a thing."

"Shit. Where'd I land?"

"About five miles offshore."

"And she brought me back here?"

"Nope. Someone took a waveskimmer out and found you floating face down. Paris refuses to even talk about you."

"Sorry for what I said. Old wounds. My previous life had its disappointments." I didn't feel like explaining.

"I figured something like that."

Tommy said nothing more for several minutes. Then, "Paris wants to be a Protector, Ben. Did you know that? First surfer girl to cruise the galaxy, saving worlds from the evil Empire. Our own little Protector. Our Golden Surfer."

I rolled my eyes. These boys had surfaced a few too many waves down here. "Not a good idea, Tommy. Consider yourself lucky that nobody out there knows you guys are here."

The bonfire suddenly collapsed, sending a cloud of sparks spiraling upward. I watched them float, only to be startled as a slender female figure uncurled and stood up in the flames. She shook her blonde hair, which sent a massive cloud of sparks rising, and then stepped out on the sand in front of me. Leaning against a boulder that had been heated by the fire, she looked back over her shoulder at me.

Of course it was Paris. She was nude, her skin glowing red-hot and her figure even more pronounced than earlier today. So this was how she gathered her energy. A bit crude, but it obviously worked.

"You've met some Protectors, right?" she asked me, acting as if nothing had happened between us. "I mean, in person?" She stared at me, eyes glowing.

I said nothing. I was still pissed.

"O.K, look, I'm sorry, Ben. You pushed the wrong button back there."

"You did more than that," I growled.

"I'm really sorry. Can we start over? Please?"

"Yeah, sure," I said doubtfully.

"Tell me about them. The Protectors. More importantly, how you got to be what you are. All the details."

I closed my eyes for a long moment. I didn't feel like telling that story right now. "It's kind of involved."

"Waves are blown out. We're not going anywhere. I need to decide how to deal with you, and with my mother's request of me."

So, she was reconsidering.

I sighed, and began to slowly take them through the story. It took an hour. I was starting to get good at telling it.

"So to your point," I ended, "I've known lots of Protectors."

The last was only technically true. I didn't feel like sharing that the P1's in school wouldn't have anything to do with me. None of them had invited me to participate in their Rites. After that, they were off in training and then they left the planet.

I'd met a Protector at an embassy function on Reigel, Cher'ee was her name, but we hadn't done more than exchange pleasantries. I'd just stared at her in fascination, dressed as she was in her official uniform, cape and all. There was definitely something about a girl in uniform.

The reality was that I'd always felt inadequate and insecure around true Velorians. Invisible even. It was even worse with Protectors.

That was O.K most of the time. My job was to be unremarkable, and I excelled at that. Which is why I'd become such a good Minder.

"What do you know about Kryp'terrans?" Paris asked.

"Just rumor and innuendo. All of which seemed exaggerated until I met Klara. She was... impressive."

"She's still worried that she hurt you. She called to ask if you were O.K."

"Well, I was." I lifted my hand to my swollen eye.

"Sorry, I've got a temper," Paris said, as if by way of explanation. Hardly an apology. "And as Myra told you, we're a lot stronger than Protectors." She made a fist, and an enormous biceps rose from her slender arm. It glowed as if lit from inside as she strained. "See?"

I did. I'd never seen a muscle like that, not even in the holos depicting Viragos. Swallowing hard, I said, "I don't know how to train someone as strong as you, Paris."

"Then how about Myra? Teach her. She can then enhance my guys. Enough for me to finish the job at least."

"Are you sure, Paris?" Tommy added. "It might not work. And this is a big chance for you. With Ben. To know... you know, true pleasure. Happiness."

She smiled at him. "I've always known true pleasure in your arms, my love. I don't need a super man to make me happy. Only you and Rick."

Tommy and Paris hugged each other close, her kisses returning his.

I suddenly realized that there was no place for me here. Paris had her men. She wanted to find her own way to have her children. I'd talk to Myra. Maybe there was a way.

Rising, I faded back into the darkness, and was soon flying low over the pounding waves, heading north across the vast ocean.

This time at least I had the energy to make it home.

Chapter Five

A week later I was looking for Aayla's studio in the middle of the city. Since the directions were complex, I again hired a taxi to get me there.

Unfortunately, we were stopped by a road closure where an elevated highway was being built. A huge shadow fell over the cab, and I looked out the window to see a span of four-lane concrete roadway that must have been two hundred meters long float overhead. A very slender blonde-haired woman, wearing an ordinary pair of jeans and a leather jacket, was supporting it at the exact center.

I tossed some money at the cabbie and scrambled out the door to join a gathering crowd. Our eyes never left the woman as she gently lowered the long span onto three support columns. Her hair billowed around her head as the energy left her body, and the determined look on her face evidenced the strain of supporting the gargantuan span while nudging it exactly into place.

This had to be Aayla.

Dozens of workmen were positioned by the supporting columns, preparing to weld the exposed steel rods in place.

Like with Myra's feat earlier, I tried to estimate the weight. There was no comparison. This huge span had to be a hundred times heavier. Far, far outside the strength range of a Supremis. Even greater than the most optimistic reports I'd read about the Kryp'terrans.

Ann was right. She and her daughters formed an incredibly robust genetic pool.

I watched openmouthed as Aayla slowly nudged the span it into exact alignment, her eyes flashing to make the first welds of the protruding rebar. She steadied it for long minutes as the army of workmen made enough additional welds to secure it.

She finally floated downward to land on the street. She was very tall, 6'2" at least, looking like a lanky fashion model rather than the voluptuous curves of a Protector. She clenched and unclenched her fists as she walked toward the crowd, working the strain out of them. Her leather top was unsnapped to reveal a red top and bare midriff.

I tried to imagine her having a hundred times a Protector's strength inside that slender body, but failed completely. I was still trying when in the blink of an eye, she vanished into thin air.

The gawking spectators began to drift away, knowing the show was over.

A honk from the nearby street said my taxi driver hadn't given up on me. I ran over and got back inside.

"Who was that woman?"

"One of them McCloud girls," the cabbie replied with a shrug. "Supposed to only be four of them, but I swear I've seen a dozen different looking ones."

He started to regale me with wild stories about the McClouds as he edged the cab through the crowded streets. The accounts sounded more like mythology than fact. He described what they looked like, and I recognized Ann, Myra and Klara in his descriptions. Paris too. But the other half-dozen vivid descriptions couldn't all be Aayla.

A half hour later, he dropped me off in front of a modern glass building. Ten stories tall and made of clear glass, I could see large canvases and murals displayed inside. The words "McCloud Gallery" were melted into the marble facade.

Obviously Aayla's personal touch.

I walked into the open gallery. Most of the displayed murals were shots of Sanctuary from space. Some of the other planets in the system as well, along with other planets I didn't recognize. Because the people of Sanctuary had no space flight capability, the McClouds provided their only views of their planet from space.

A couple of employees were scurrying around as they helped some browsing customers. I joined them to admire Aayla's artwork. I quickly discovered that her images were incredibly detailed, yet with none of the distortions of a lens. I was soon staring at a gigantic wall mural of Sanctuary, forty feet on a side. Intrigued, I leaned closer, only to realize with a shock that I could actually see roads and buildings.

I picked up a large magnifying glass from a table and leaned close. I was astounded to find I could actually read road signs. Yet the image had clearly been taken from several thousand miles in space.

How could she have rendered such incredible detail?

One of the employees finally spotted me and asked if I had an appointment. She was a redhead in her early twenties, her eyes an amazing shade of forest green. I handed her the envelope, addressed as it was to Aayla McCloud.

She nodded, seemingly expecting me. "Follow me." She guided me down a maze of corridors and through a door that opened into a large room.

Inside, the same woman I'd seen lifting that huge section of roadway was practicing with an energy sword. The glowing blade made a buzzing, groaning noise as she swept it through the air, her movements sure and fast. Her leather jacket was gone, and she now wore a black sleeveless top and the same jeans.

The fusion generator in the sword hilt was glowing red-hot, her hands and forearms heating to incandescence from the radiation.

Arion Primes often used this type of lethal sword, as it was capable of causing great pain and even injury when used against a Velorian's skin. However, no human or Betan could hold the glowing hilt without serious injury, let alone resist a cut from the blade. It was strictly a Prime's weapon.

She proved its power by spinning around to slash at a larger-than-life statue, an abstract depiction of a man. The blade cut through the meter-thick polished black stone in a blaze of sparks. The upper half of the statue fell cleanly to the floor. She spun and stabbed again, the flaring blade penetrating and melting a hole in the statue's stomach this time. Molten rock trickled from the hole as the sword generator went into overdrive.

Her entire upper body gave off a faint reddish glow by the time she spun around to take a stance directly in front of me, legs spread, sword held in both hands and upraised, prepared for a killing blow. She stared into my eyes.

"Who the fuck are you? And why are you following me?"

"Didn't Myra..." I paused. I tried again. "You are Aayla, aren't you?"

She answered by spinning around to deliver a kick to the side of my head that sent me flying. I hit the far wall and crumpled to the floor. She gave off a little cry as she leaped after me, straddling my hips as I looked up into her sparkling eyes. Before I could move, she stabbed the sword's tip against my chest.

A riot of sparks obscured my sight as a horrible vibrating pain lanced through me, my clothing bursting into flames. It felt like my heart was going to explode. Yet instead of running me through, I looked down in amazement to see only a small red spot in the center of my chest. I should have been killed!

"So, you finally came to play with me, Ben Shaffer," she said with a smirk. "Pity that you left poor Aayla for last. But at least Klara's enhancement worked on you." There was a barely perceptible hint of a smile on her lips.

I backed away. Enhancement! That had to be it. "Not even a full Velorian could resist that sword."

She thumbed the switch and the energy blade retracted. She handed the hilt to me. "Good thing you're not a Velorian."

The hilt glowed painfully hot in my hands, but not too much to hold it. "But... how?"

"My sisters Klara and Paris also have my father's genes, although they don't share all of my abilities. After Myra and my mother contacted me with that glowing report about your potency, I decided that lovemaking with her and Paris might just give you the extra power to make you interesting for me. So I had myself placed last on the schedule."

"Intense?" I sputtered. "How did you know that *sabret* wasn't going to kill me?"

"I didn't. But if it did, you'd be no use to me."

"Why you..." I stabbed the button with my thumb, almost pushing it through the socket, and the blade buzzed back to life. As fast as I could, I swept it toward her waist, but she ducked lithely under the blade.

"You're angry," she teased. "Good, maybe that will turn you into a fighter instead of just a lover."

I growled and began slashing and hacking and spinning my way across the room, trying to touch her. She was always just a fraction of a second faster than I, leaving my blade to cut growling swaths through the air.

Minutes passed before I unexpectedly altered my strokes and spun the opposite way, and barely succeeded in landing a glancing blow on her shoulder.

A riot of sparks filled the air.

She halted to look down at her glowing skin. "Very good. You're faster than I expected."

"I claim the right of conquest," I growled.

She smiled, and knelt on the floor. "You've studied Arion culture. Good. I like their sense of honor in battle." She lifted her hair to bare her neck. "I offer you my life, noble warrior." Leaning down, she shouted, "Sha'mir."

I just stared down at her, not sure what I was supposed to do with that offer. I'd just wanted her to admit defeat. Her life was the last thing I wanted.

Instead, I bent down and gently slipped the tip of the glowing blade along the inside of her left thigh. The denim of her jeans vaporized in a blaze of sparks, revealing a stripe of smooth, tanned skin, with only a faint red mark marring her skin from the sword's power. I daringly worked the blade tip up her other thigh as well, and her body began to tremble, her skin glowing brilliantly.

She leaned her head back, her hair falling over her shoulders as she smiled up into my eyes. She gasped loudly and began to quiver as I reached her pubic bone. I began to lift her body upward with the tip of the sword. A sizzling squeal joined the groaning buzz of the blade as she slowly rose to face me.

The remains of her jeans were on fire now. Her body trembled violently, a wicked flare of light obscuring the apex of her legs, as a pleading look lit up her eyes. She was gasping for breath, lost in what had unexpectedly turned into an erotic moment. A small voice in my head said to back off. That I was playing with fire. Literally.

I took a step back, only to have her snatch my hands and pull them and the hilt toward her center. As she forced the energy beam into her glowing nether lips, the blade gave off a deafening squeal and swelled under the tension as it shortened and slowly disappeared. A wave of painful heat washed over me as her lower body heated to incandescence, the groan of the blade and the scream of the energy generator forcing me to release the hilt and cover my ears.

I stumbled backward as she wailed in obvious passion with such force that I was slammed back against the wall. Her body was white-hot as she kneeled, arching her back as the hilt of the sword finally shorted out from the overload and exploded in a shower of blinding sparks.

When I could see again, I found her cuddled up in a corner, half her body enveloped in flames, shaking.

I walked across the floor to kneel beside her, wincing again from the intense heat. I helped her rise, and she staggered a few steps, her knees touching as she tried to walk. Her inner thighs looked like the glowing metal of an iron foundry.

"That... that was impossible," I gasped. "To live through that and find pleasure in it"

"Impossible? Nothing... nothing is impossible," she gasped as she tried to catch her breath as well. "It hurt so bad that it felt sublime. Wonderful."

She sat down heavily on a wooden chair, only to have it catch fire. She rose again, and struggled to float crookedly just off the floor. Her equilibrium was off.

Was she some kind of masochist?

So into pain that she experienced it as pleasure?

"Quench the fires within me," she cried. "Please."

Despite the overwhelming heat, I did my best.

We were lying exhausted on the floor of her studio an hour later. The room looked as if a hurricane had blown through. Some worried employees peeked around the charred door. Aayla sent them away with a wave of her hand.

"Lady Aayla, I see it is all true now," I said as gallantly as I could. "Your powers have to be the greatest of all. I had not expected so great a difference between sisters. First that bridge span, far too heavy for any Supremis, and now cheating death with that lethal sword. Death turned instead to pleasure."

"Especially given that I'm so thin," she said, wetting her lips with her tongue, her slender legs still intertwined with mine."

"Your appearance is deceptive, I'll admit." I wasn't sure what else to say.

"Klara told me so much about you, Ben. You made a big impression on her, which is why I bothered to play with you. Now you have impressed me."

"I was lucky that Klara was so receptive to me. Otherwise, I would never have a chance at an enhancement."

"I never had any doubt about it. And don't worry about Klara. She's back with mother now. Her little religion forgotten, at least for the moment."

"Can't have a religion without worshippers. Klara was too arrogant to listen to me, and too proud of her own abilities to listen to my warning. Even though that one set of muscles of hers has got to be the best developed in the universe."

"Did she hurt you?"

"I recover quickly."

"Always the oblique answer. You should be a diplomat."

I grinned at her, finding that I liked her forthrightness. "With my current responsibilities, as well as my past ones," I said, "diplomacy may be a requirement."

Aayla laughed. "Klara is young, as they all are. In experience especially."

"I'm not sure if that comforted the men who died on her little island. Or their families."

"Ordinaries are always dying."

I frowned. "You sound like Klara now. Putting yourself above them."

"We are above them. Physically but not morally. I care about their suffering. That's why mother was almost killed out there. It was her turn to patrol. Usually that's my job. I get to do my imaging while I'm in space. That is my passion." She winked at me again. "Most of the time, anyway."

"Do just the two of you take turns?" I didn't want to talk about her passions. Not while my head was still reeling.

"Only Mom, Paris and I. Being a do-gooding goddess was a full time job for Klara," she smirked. "And of course, Myra can't fly."

"Well, we had luck on our side this time around."

"The name of that luck is Ben Shaffer. If you hadn't come along, my mother would be in gold cuffs and on her way to Aria."

"Yeah, well, I shouldn't even have been there." "But you were, and you acted selflessly. And you proved that your bravery was no accident by standing up to me with that *sabret*. You have earned your place in our hearts."

I tried to change the subject again. I was still uncomfortable with being a hero. "Do you take turns wearing that uniform as well?"

"Paris usually keeps it, sometimes Klara as you saw. Paris would like nothing more than to be commissioned as a Protector and sent to some distant corner of the universe, but she can't go near Velor for fear of revealing us. Fortunately, she doesn't need the Rites to have more than a Protector's abilities, not with Krypt' blood in her veins."

"Which makes her stronger than your mother?"

"Stronger than any Protector, including your vaunted Viragos."

That scared me. "There were some moments with Klara when I wasn't sure if I was going to live to see the dawn."

"I'm sure she wasn't sure either. Or that she wanted you to. But you've changed her."

"Sometimes a good *sorn'fuk* does that."

Aayla's smile widened. "Spoken like a true Velorian. For a man born a human, you've become very impressive. Too bad Paris is being such a little bitch about it all."

"She's in love. I think she would have played along if not for Tommy and Rick."

"They've always held her back. But she's young and Ordinaries don't live long. She'll learn."

"Myra was afraid you'd try to monopolize me."

"I might. I don't share well."

"And she says that people can't say no to you."

"Because of my other pheromones. Not just arousal, but also the lesser scents of fear and domination. Which I'm told you can suppress."

"I never heard that any Supremis could use those lesser Scents."

"They can't."

"Then I don't understand."

"Our father was special. His genetics were closer to Galen than those of most Kryp'terrans."

I just stared at her for a long moment. The words burst from my lips. "You're Galen?"

"More rather than less."

"No wonder Myra is afraid of you."

Aayla put the hilt of her energy sword back in its case. "She's not afraid of me, but she's terrified about how I can control others -- human or Supremis, they can be controlled by the three scents. The Galen instilled that in humans when we helped you cross the gap from ape to man."

"And then they instilled the gold weakness in the Supremis?"

Aayla nodded. "The Galen tried not to underestimate humans and their derivatives. According to my father, you were to be their successors in this galaxy when they moved on. But until then, you needed controls."

"Were? Has the plan changed?"

"I think so. It's all a big secret anyway."

"But you're telling me."

"Only what I know, and that isn't much. Besides, it appears that you can resist those pheromones, when you try. The first woman who enhanced you was part Galen. Surely you suspected that?"

I just stared at her, dumbfounded. I'd thought Xara was a Protector.

"My father worked with a group of Galen that keeps tabs on the Velorians and Arions, trying to divert them from activities that weren't appropriate. Just like Velorians and Arions who hide themselves in human populations, we hide among the Supremis. He spent some time on Earth."

"We? You're really part of that group?"

"Sorry. Slip of tongue. Everything I know my father told me. And only me. He left when the others were too young to understand."

"But you confine yourself to this system as well?"

"Hardly. Mom wouldn't understand, but I've been through this uncharted wormhole near our system. It contains an interesting time-space warp inside the hole that leads to a planet named Rostran. A world nearly as isolated as this one."

"That explains the images I saw of worlds outside this system. Was one of those Rostran?"

Aayla nodded. "An interesting planet, but not one you'd like. A matriarchy of Primes."

I shuddered at that thought. "Do you masquerade as an Arion there?"

"I'm a bit elusive there, taking on a variety of forms. I'm trying to mellow their warlike tendencies by influencing their culture and government. I settled a dispute there some time ago, thanks to the wonders of time warp, and they see me as their goddess. As such they've built all these social mechanisms that serve me. It keeps them out of trouble."

"Really? The way you were talking about Klara, I wouldn't peg you as a candidate for goddess-hood."

"She's insecure at heart. The worship was a way of soothing her doubts without resolving them. I don't need that kind of validation; it's just a tool for achieving my ends."

That self-assurance - or egoism - didn't leave much else to be said, so I went on with another question. "But I thought the Galen were the model for Velorians? Blonde perfection and all. You really can look like an Arion?"

"I can, although I suspect you wouldn't appreciate that. My attitude seems to change with my form. But that's not how I usually appear to them. I prefer red hair there."

"An interesting way to manipulate an entire culture. By becoming a deity."

"Good for a woman's ego too," she winked.

"I hardly think your ego needs stroking. You're gorgeous."

"Which is Myra's worry. She didn't show it, but she's afraid you won't return to her, Ben. She thinks I'll steal you."

"I will. Return I mean. In fact, I liked her best..." I stopped. "I mean, she was the most human of all. The person I most identified with."

"But she doesn't look like the women you admire."

"That has nothing..." I paused again as I saw her eyebrow lift. Why deny it? Aayla was capable of figuring out what I was thinking anyway. "I grew up on Earth after the rumors started on our Net about Xara and her mother. The stories were just urban legends to many people, but my friends and I believed. I think we were imprinted with blonde supergirls."

"Terran men are easily impressed by the Supremis."

"How would you know anything of Earth? Out here, so isolated."

"I told you, my father traveled widely. Gathering information for the Galen. He told me many things of many worlds. His fascination was with Earth."

"I'd love to hear about some of that. Mainly how the Kryp'terrans and Galen view Earth."

"Let me get dressed and you can take me to dinner. I'm starved. We can talk then."

Dinner was at a corner restaurant serving local curries and breads. Hot, spicy and delicious. Naan bread in several flavors. I detected hints of Indian and Thai spice in the gravies, as well as some indefinable but interesting local spices. It never ceased to amaze me how far Earth culture had spread across the galaxy.

We talked all evening long about humans and Galen, of Velorians and Arions, and finally about the intersection of those races, Kryp'terrans. She seemed to enjoy having someone she could talk openly to, someone who'd visited more worlds than she had.

We retired to the bar, and she rested her elbows on it as she looked at me with one blue eye, listening intently as I described my experiences on Reigel 5 and Velor.

Also my misadventure on Cara's World. She laughed at that tale.

Outside of that humorous moment, the rest was a sad tale. I told her how hard it had been to go to school on Velor, and the way the girls had excluded me because of my genetics. Teenagers tend to be cruel toward kids who are different, but usually everyone can find some kind of group to belong to. As the only human on Velor, I had no one to turn to. So I was universally ostracized.

I tried to convey the depth of disappointment I'd felt.

She seemed to read my mind. "So you still have this unrequited longing for the girls of Velor? Despite their cruelty and rejection?"

"I can't get past it," I admitted, looking down, nervously playing with my napkin. This was getting too close to home again.

"Klara must have helped scratch that itch."

"I was fighting for my life, Aayla. And I knew she wasn't Velorian."

"Then why don't we scratch that itch together? I have an interest in exploring Velorian social norms and behavior with someone who has been there, and you have your passions. I'd like to see how they converge."

"I don't understand," I said. "You aren't Velorian either."

She stood up as I talked, reaching for her leather jacket. "Not right now. But come back to my place with me and perhaps we can create a little bit of Velor here on Sanctuary."

I had no idea what she was talking about until she was standing in the shadows of her living room a half hour later. A look of concentration crossed her face, and I heard a sickening crunch, almost like bone and cartilage tearing. Then her left shoulder began to twist in a way that only broken bones would allow. Another wet tearing sound sent a grimace of pain flitting across her face.

She turned her back to me. "Leave... leave me for a little while," she gasped.

I reached behind my back to grope for the doorknob, reluctant to tear my eyes away from her. I'd heard stories about shape changing, but had never observed it. Unfortunately, a further series of wet pops and crunching of bone sent me running.

I knelt in the garden outside and nearly lost my stomach. Gasping for air, I was suddenly ashamed of my reaction. The idea of her changing form had seemed appealing, even sexy, until I saw it start.

I couldn't imagine the horrors that were going on back in the room now, but my stubborn imagination insisted on trying. I saw shattered bones and torn muscles intermingling and turning to a red puddle of goo and torn cartilage and... I lost it right there. Leaning over, I vomited again and again as a flood of horrific images filled my mind.

When my stomach was emptied and my nausea reduced to an uncomfortable flutter, I walked to the courtyard bar to get a drink. Downing two fingers of the local whiskey, my sensibilities returned enough to appreciate its almost perfect Scotch flavor. It was very good. I poured a further three fingers and collapsed in an overstuffed chair. Fortunately, alcohol and drugs still worked on me to some extent. And it sure tasted good going down.

I thought about Ann McCloud's daughters, and the way they were turning out to be even more challenging than I'd expected. Each one was so different.

Paris and her refusal to participate, preferring instead to attempt the creation of her own supermen. The little surfer girl and her two lovers. She was going to attempt the impossible.

Then Klara and her misguided sense of social justice, not to mention creating and then destroying a religion that rotated around herself. I had no idea what to expect of her the next time we met.

Now Aayla and her art. Also her fascination with the Galen part of her Kryp'terran heritage, and with Supremis culture in general. Her amazing description of being regarded as a goddess on another world. A world of Primes. I knew there was going to be a lot more to that story.

And then of course, Ann McCloud and her grand plan to create her own branch of the Supremis. Arion and Kryp'terran/Galen, her legacy from Aphro'dite, and now my blend of Terran and Velorian. The Kryp'terran father who'd lived on Earth, and now Aayla turning out to be more Galen than anything else.

Finally, little Myra, so much like an Old One.

An amazing group. But was creating her own branch of the Supremis out of arrogance, or was it simple practicality on Ann's part?

I wasn't sure yet. But she'd done really well at genetic diversity so far. And by including my genes, she'd definitely mix things up further.

The challenge would be the next generation. They would all be my children. Unless I passed on really diverse gene sets to different kids, possible with my mutt background, we would need another male to strengthen the line, preferably Velorian to avoid mixing any more junk DNA with my own.

Another Velorian femme would be good too. Velorian DNA was the cleanest in the universe. No recessive or regressive traits. They would mate with my children. That would clinch the deal.

I thought of Nikki back on Reigel 5. She had very good genes, but no future in the Enlightenment given the way she'd chosen to live.

Would she prosper here on Sanctuary or simply continue her destructive behavior?

Even if she could be persuaded to come, I still had to find another male. That would have to be Aayla's job.

I smiled as I thought of Myra last and longest. The girl with the ancient genes, but the delightfully unaffected personality. I felt something special with her, despite her young age. She didn't look upon herself as a goddess, but just a girl with some unusual talents.

She was the closest of all the sisters to having a human heart. Despite her young age, she also seemed the most centered. I was suddenly surprised to find that I couldn't wait to get back to her.

That thought made me smile even brighter. Here I was, the guy who'd always had such expansive dreams of Velorians, and I was falling for the short, little Arion girl.

I looked back toward Aayla's door, and my heart raced in anticipation. O.K, maybe I still had some of those dreams.

An itch to scratch.

I suddenly couldn't wait to see what Aayla had in store for me. Whatever form she was creating, I suspected it was going to be a memorable one.

Nearly two hours and an entire bottle of whiskey later, she called for me. I was half drunk when I opened the door and stepped through.

My jaw dropped as I saw a totally unfamiliar looking blonde sitting on the floor. Tangled golden blonde hair fell over her face, and she was buffed to the point of being muscular. Also incredibly endowed. Her blue eyes were huge and bright, and her skin was glowing with that permatan color that is so uniquely Velorian. It was also perfectly smooth, no pores or tiny hairs to mar her perfection. Teeth and whites of eyes like bone china.

She'd put on a pair of studded leather sandals that featured a shin guard. I assumed she thought they were appropriate for a Protector.

She was tugging on the useless straps of her now ridiculously undersized brassiere. Her bottom was little more than a leather g-string. My heart nearly leaped out of my chest. I'm still a hopeless sucker at heart for that powerful super-blonde look. I swallowed hard.

"If you looked any more like a Protector, Aayla, we'd have to make you a Virago."

She smiled wryly. "I'm a lot stronger than a Virago. And isn't this how all you guys imagine Velorian Protectors? Bimbos with big blue eyes, ultra-blonde hair and supertits? Muscles strong enough to tear Vendorian steel apart in our bare hands, and sexy enough to fuck you to death if we wanted to?"

If anyone else said such a thing, it would be the height of arrogance. But I realized that I was looking at a woman that those people on Rostran legitimately regarded as a goddess. I wasn't one of them, but I was willing to worship her.

In one way, anyway.

She began to sing sweetly as she rose to change into her Protector's red and blues. I watched in growing arousal as she adjusted the red skirt, her back to me, her body so buffed, so golden. She turned her head to look back over her shoulder, her singing growing louder.

"Come away with me, and we'll kiss on a mountain top.

"And I want to wake up with the rain, falling on a tender leaf.

"While I'm safe there in your arms.

"Come away with me in the night, and we'll embrace the sun.

"To wake in God's golden arms."

I won't say a lot more about Aayla except to say that she fulfilled every dream I'd ever had about the passion of a true Protector. She seemed to read my mind, drawing my fantasies out and enabling each and every one of them. As exciting as the other McClouds had been, Aayla was truly a goddess of love.

Over the next days, we made love on each and every planet in the solar system, even on the surface of a comet as it raced around the sun. We wound up our erotic tour of the system by loving in the photosphere of the sun itself, sinking deeply into that nuclear fire as our passions rose from the heat. Heat that no longer burned me.

A week later, we were back on Sanctuary, and it was close to my time to leave Aayla and return to Myra. We stood in her studio as she prepared to create one of her images.

I looked over her strong shoulder. "How do you include such detail in your paintings?"

"They aren't truly paintings, Ben. The process is more photographic, although more accurate than any camera lens."

"But the selling point of your art is that there is no technology involved."

"I have the gift of a photographic memory. And I've learned to project an image I've memorized. I tune my eyes to the ultraviolet spectrum, enabling my heat vision, and then using a special photographic film that's sensitive to those frequencies."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"There are a lot of things in this universe that you haven't heard of. But perhaps we'll learn a few more together."

I turned to glance out the window. I was already late for my meeting with Myra. "I have to go, Aayla. I'll return next month."

"I don't want you to go, Ben."

"But you won't stop me. You gave your word to Myra."

She closed her eyes for a long moment. "My word. Always my word."

"She is your sister." I saw tears forming in Aayla's eyes as she nodded bravely. I grabbed my pants and walked out to the beach behind her studio. It wasn't supposed to be this hard.

Aayla followed me out onto the deck. "You are not the man you were when you first met her. Be careful with her."

I turned to look back at her, her bright smile and dazzlingly blue eyes a vision in Velorian perfection, and then I leapt into the air.

As I cut through the puffy clouds, I reflected on what had happened to me. Interestingly, I'm not a lot stronger than before, still well short of a Prime's. And I am not better endowed or anything like that. Just a bit better at handling heat and energy. Aayla's passion. Apparently a Galen thing.

I was humbled by Aayla and Klara's power to further enhance me in ways that even Xara hadn't dreamed. My body had been tweaked and tuned by three Galen goddesses now. What were the odds of that happening to a gangly kid from Pennsylvania? A trillion to one.

That thought reminded me of Aayla's comments about her living two lives. One here, one on Rostran. A second life her mother and sisters knew nothing of.

I too knew something of living two lives.

Was she going to Rostran now?

Spending the next month as her alter ego?

Telling everyone that she was off doing her imaging work while she became the goddess of another world?

I debated asking to travel to Rostran with her. I assumed an enhanced man would be welcome there. A world of superwomen. To be honest, the concept was exciting as hell.

Then I remembered what I'd heard of Primal lovemaking. That it was a form of combat. Fatalities happened, although they were rare. It was definitely sex, but hardly intimacy. And I was hardly a Prime.

My thoughts returned again to my next meeting with Myra. Smiling, I remembered how enthusiastic she'd been.

Yet still gentle, seeming reacting to me with human sensitivity. And so mature for a girl of sixteen. Paris and Klara I could do without.

But Myra and Aayla? Such lovely contrasts to each other.

I decided I wasn't ready to give up human sensitivities and culture just yet. My body might have moved beyond human, but not my soul. With Myra's help, hopefully it never would.

I grinned into the supersonic slipstream as I eagerly looked forward to the simple joy of Myra's sweet smile. To a girl I could truly fall in love with.

(To be continued next with Aayla's exploits in an upcoming edition of *Shore Leave*. And Ben and Myra's quest to bring Nikki to Sanctuary in, *Bird of Paradise*.)