

## Ordinary Velorians Shore Leave



### Book One of *The Gwyndlyn*

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It has now been six months since the events in *Alisa's Story* took place, and during that time the starship *Anders Flame* transited the wormhole Cygnias 275 with great difficulty and arrived at a mysterious world that is not on any star chart. The locals call it Rostran.

Captain Peter Durgin and his crew have found the Rostrans to be suspicious and unfriendly. Unable to get permission to send a landing party to Rostran itself, he negotiates a visit by a Cultural and Trade team. They are allowed to land on a sparsely populated outpost on their moon to deliver a sample QED module.

A day later, the Rostrans revoke their permission and order the *Flame* to depart their space. They seem disturbed and confused by the information the crew has passed on regarding the newly mapped wormhole that brought the *Flame* to Rostran space.

He was about to order the away team back from the outpost on the moon when an encrypted communication arrives from a Rostran Senator. Paradoxically, the Senator reverses the demand to leave and warmly invites Durgin to send two specially-selected crew members down to participate in a royal celebration at the capital on Rostran. Something called a Conjugational.

Unsure now whether his ship is caught between two different power groups on Rostran, or if the Rostran leadership has just had a change of heart, Durgin nevertheless agrees. Given the joint Kelsorian mandate of exploration and commerce, and the huge commercial potential for wormhole Cygnias 275, it's an offer he dare not refuse.

# Chapter 1

*(Date: 1052-11-01, 06:30 Ship's Time)*

"What the hell do you mean, you're sending us on shore leave? We've got a mountain of data to go through from the Cygnias transit. This is ridiculous. We promised Admiral Tso that..."

The Duty Officer opened his mouth to try to explain, only to be cut off as Captain Peter Durgin walked into the conference room, catching the end of the argument. Both men and the female officer standing beside them snapped to attention. "I don't care if you promised Jesus Christ himself," Durgin said brusquely. "We've got a unique opportunity to build some good will with the Rostrans. An invitation to some kind of royal wedding."

Lieutenant Andre Kalik swallowed hard and started all over again, forcing himself to talk slower this time, emphasizing every word. "Captain, Ensign Liddell and I have worked for two weeks on this report. By tomorrow night we'll have it wrapped up and we can get it into the conference before the deadline. Anyway, aren't First Contacts Culture's job?"

"Culture is doing its job, but they're just getting started with Rostran. Your Physics section already has all the data we're going to gather on this penetration. And it looks like Culture is going to have a lot more work than usual charting the Rostran variations from normal human paradigms."

"Then you should send Lieutenant Hegson. I'm not qualified for this kind of thing."

"You may not be, but the Ensign here has shown some talent in cross cultural exchanges." Durgin gave Alisa Liddell a meaningful glance. Her strikingly blue eyes met his, narrowing slightly in anger. She was the newest science officer in Physics. She worked for Kalik. Unknown to most of the crew, she and Durgin knew each other in a far less formal way.

"Besides," Durgin continued, "they insisted that our emissaries be science officers."

Kalik persisted. "There have to be a dozen other science officers on board who are better qualified at making cultural contacts than us."

"The Rostrans late request was for us to also send the two youngest officers in our crew." Durgin was shading the truth. They'd actually asked for the fittest members of the science team. Alisa fit that bill in spades.

"Hegson's barely thirty, and Jeane Sparks isn't much older than Alisa. Just have them shuttle down to the planet from the moon," Kalik pressed, waving his hands. "You'll learn more from them than you ever would from us, and we can get our paper in on time. Problem solved."

Durgin glared at him. "You aren't following me, Lieutenant. This isn't a formal First Contact. That's why it's going into the log as shore leave. It's also why Culture isn't going along for the ride. Just in case either we or the Rostrans want to deny it ever happened."

"Now it sounds more like an Intel job," Kalik said disgustedly.

Durgin shrugged. "Call it what you want, but nobody in Security or Culture is going to pass Rostran scrutiny. They were very specific about Science Officers."

Kalik stopped waving his hands as Durgin's words sunk in. "Are they seriously interested in a scientific exchange?"

"No idea. But their invitation went from gracious to enthusiastic when I described you two."

"Doesn't that worry you, Captain?" Kalik said with a concerned glance towards Alisa. She'd just turned twenty-two, but looked even younger. "We know nothing about their intentions."

"They're a bit xenophobic, I admit, but Culture thinks their society is peaceful. The only oddities so far have to do with their last minute change of mind about visiting their planet, and their very specific instructions about sending only human crewmen down."

Alisa glanced pointedly at Durgin, her eyes narrowing further. They both knew it was a matter of longstanding philosophical debate whether Velorians were human. Regardless, she was very experienced at passing for human.

"That seems kind of obvious, given we're all Kelsorians," Kalik grunted as he resumed pacing around the room. He knew nothing of Alisa's true background. What he did know was that she and the Captain had recently had a falling out. Shipboard romance gone bad, or so the rumors went. "So we put the entire universe on hold for that... that royal marriage or conjugational or whatever it is. That backward world wouldn't know a wormhole if it swallowed them whole."

"Science is only part of our mission," Durgin reminded him, struggling to keep his temper. He'd had enough of babysitting the brats down in Physics. "We're ambassadors for Kelsor as well. Cygnias 275 is a high potential wormhole and these people happen to be located at one end of it. That means they get

to manage who and what goes through it. We want Kelsor to be at the head of that list. There is zero saturation of QED modules in this quadrant."

"Not that they even know what a QED is," Alisa finally joined in, her voice low and rich with tonal highlights. "Or a wormhole for that matter."

"They know now. By protocol, I had to brief them on the hole this morning. That and my usual pitch on QED modules. I suspect that's what led to their change of heart."

"Then are we authorized to reveal the nature and location of the singularity, Sir and Captain?" Alisa asked. "Most importantly, can we discuss the conventions regarding financial gain from commerce resulting from our mapping mission?"

Stung once again by her formal manner, addressing him by Kelsorian honorific only, Durgin felt the anger of betrayal rising again. He glared at her, struggling to put their failed relationship behind and view her as just another member of his crew. It didn't help that she looked too young and too blonde to be a Kelsorian research scientist on a deep-space mission. Dressed in a pair of running shorts and t-shirt, a sliver of tight abs showing, she looked like she should still be back on the University campus on Kelsor. Yet her performance during the transit had secured her status as one of the top scientists on the ship. "No, Ensign, you will not tell them a damn thing. That's up to Trade when they get here. Your job is merely to create good will with the Rostrans. Any way you can do it." He emphasized "any way".

Alisa glared at him. "What exactly does that mean, Captain?"

Durgin had become cold and bitter since their brief romance had ended. An ending that was solely his fault as far as she was concerned. He'd ruined the perfect shipboard romance with his confession of love, asking her to marry him. How could he think of that when the ink was barely dry on his third divorce?

"Any way means exactly that, Ensign. Whatever it takes. You and the lieutenant will follow Rostran customs and protocols to the letter. You will smile at all the right places, you will kiss the bride and groom or whatever else is called for, and you will get back here to finish your work. As I said, we're logging this as shore leave, whether or not you may consider it such after you read up on Rostran customs."

Alisa looked startled. She hadn't considered that Rostran customs might be unusual, even deviate. She glanced worriedly at Kalik. He was still too wrapped up in his own disappointment to comprehend Durgin's veiled warning.

Kalik saved her from saying something she'd regret. "I do **not** have time to study primitive native customs right now, Captain," he added, his voice bordering on insolence. "As you clearly know, halfway through the wormhole transit, we found that unusual twist in the flux that we might be able to exploit for temporal journeys. We've never seen anything like this in any hole before and..."

Durgin's voice grew strained. "And the hole will be there in three days when you get back, Lieutenant. Even if it is that big of a deal, you can always submit your paper to the Temporal Society next quarter. Nobody else is going through that hole until we publish our findings."

"But... but..."

Durgin's patience was finally at an end. He exploded. "But nothing, Lieutenant. Get your butts out of here. You've got six hours tops before that ceremony starts. The two of you will be down on the surface in three. You will stay together and pretend you're enjoying yourselves, no matter what happens, do you read me?"

Kalik started to open his mouth again, but Alisa reached out to tug him gently but irresistibly toward the door. She turned her head to look meaningfully into Durgin's eyes, whispering just loud enough for both of them to hear. "Give it up, Lieutenant. If there's one thing I know about our Captain, it's that he's relentless when it comes to achieving his goals. The trade in this region is going to create some very rich men."

"Money?" Kalik fumed a last time as Alisa pushed him through the door before he could do any more damage. "This is about money? What happened to science? This is a Science Vessel, or it was when I signed on. Pure research is our charter. Not some diplomatic or trade delegation. Not some touchy, feely cultural exchange. Certainly not money."

## Chapter 2

(Date: 1052-11-01, 06:52 ST)

By the time Kalik quit complaining, he and Alisa were back in the Tank. Officially, the *Transit Analysis Neural Kynsthetics* lab. At its core was a darkened room with dozens of computer readouts and neural linkages. He and Alisa had been living there for the last two months, barely sleeping, connected directly into the heart of the ship's vast neural computing network. They were analyzing the terabytes of data the instruments had gathered during the wormhole transit.

Alisa folded one long leg beneath her as she settled lightly into her seat. "Did you see Durgin's face when he was talking about Rostran customs? I think we're really in for it."

Kalik sprawled in his chair. "I don't care. All I know is that I promised the Chairman that we'd have our paper ready. He's counting on us. He invited the Chancellor of the Temporal Society himself to attend, just to see our paper."

Alisa shrugged. "Not much we can do about that now." Twisting lithely around, she placed her fingers on the biolink to the command neural net, and entered a query on Rostran customs. Kalik looked over her shoulder at the glowing screen.

"O.K, here it comes," she said while unpinning her hair. She shook her head to free it, a sea of the shiniest and blondest hair Kalik had ever seen falling to the small of her back. He found it very distracting.

Alisa began flicking through the screens describing a Conjugational. She was on her third screen when she covered her mouth and giggled. Her eyes were sparkling playfully as she turned back to smile at Kalik. "Oh, you are so going to love this, Andre."

"Love what..." he started to say as he focused on the screen. His words choked off into a gasp, his eyes opening wide. "You mean to tell me that nobody wears any clothing down there?"

Alisa shrugged as she turned back to her display. "Not unless you consider those really sexy high heels as clothing. A Conjugational is apparently conducted bare ass naked."

She triggered the next search topic, only to burst into more giggles as more data appeared. "Oh Lordy, Lordy, look at this," she pointed excitedly at one corner of the wide screen, "it says, and I quote, '*the bride and groom share a public conjugal with the bridegrooms and best men and some of the visiting dignitaries*'."

Kalik still hadn't digested the first shock. "You mean... visitors have to go nude too?"

"Hey, check out the clothing they normally wear. Tiny bits and pieces of leather and metallic foil. There isn't a lot of difference between dressed and undressed on Rostran."

"Sharing a public conjugal... I hope that doesn't mean what I think it means?"

Alisa nodded. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure it does. The Rostrans are pretty uninhibited when it comes to their sexuality."

"And Durgin knew all this?"

Alisa frowned for a moment before answering. "Yeah, probably. Maybe he's just getting back at me. We had a falling out earlier. Sorry you're getting caught up in my mess."

Kalik sat down beside her, his face serious. "Everyone knows, Alisa. He's a complete jerk."

She looked at him balefully. "Excuse me? Everybody knows exactly what?"

"Well, ah, I mean," he stammered as he heard a hint of anger in her voice, "you know, that you and he had this thing going." He saw her eyes

narrow, and just blurted out the rumor he'd heard. "He asked you to become exclusive with him."

She punched him gently in the arm, her smile returning. "It's called getting married, dummy."

"But he did ask. Right?"

"That's none of your business." She leaned back in her chair and hugged her bare legs to her chest. "It's all in the past anyway."

He wisely changed the subject. "So, how many visiting dignitaries are there going to be at the ceremony?"

"No idea. Lets find out." Alisa sat back up and interfaced again, this time kicking the Tank's neural nets off in another direction. She watched Kalik's worried reflection in her screen as she waited for the search to complete. He was obviously working on the odds of getting selected to participate in the final Rites.

Her screen suddenly filled with detailed information on the Royal Conjugational. "Lots. More than a hundred visitors. Hmm... looks like we'll be the only ones from off-planet though. The Rostrans must not get visitors very often."

"Still, the odds are in our favor, right? Especially since..." His words choked off as a picture of an astounding endowed woman appeared on Alisa's monitor. "Wow! Those Rostran women are something else."

"She looks like something from those Z-rated porns that Kerry down in Engineering is always trying to sell. Gen-teched actresses. Nothing natural except their fingerprints."

Kalik stood up and began to pace again, a worried look on his face. "If that's your typical Rostran, nobody is even going to see us. We can just fade into the background and get the heck out of there after they say the *I do's*."

Alisa turned to look strangely at him. "Because we're unattractive compared to them. Is that what you're saying?"

Kalik failed to pick up on her tone of voice. "Right. Just a couple of geeks from the Tank. Those women are totally gorgeous. And those guys. They look like they must pump iron all the time down there."

Alisa turned back to look at the screen. Kalik didn't have a clue how deeply he'd just put his foot in his mouth, but she wasn't going to be the one to educate him. He was right about one thing, though, the Rostrans were beautiful people. No big deal to her. She'd grown up around people who were a little too perfect. People who didn't age very fast. Humans both envied and resented that. Humans had blemishes and wrinkles and sags. They needed manicures and they had bad hair days. They needed more exercise than they got. They got sick.

In half a dozen centuries she might worry about some of those things herself, but not twenty-two years into her first one.

"Damn you, Peter Durgin," she muttered under her breath. "Damn you to hell."

## Chapter 3

(Date: 1052-11-01, 0 7:00 ST)

Senator Marie Kaltquest stared out the east window of *Rivera* as the *domi* poured her cup of coffee. The sun was rising into a clear sky. It was going to be a hot day.

Mother-Superior was pacing back and forth in front of her table. She wore her usual habit, a floor-length brown robe with a hood covering her head. Only her eyes were visible, glowing their usual eerie blue.

"I don't understand why you didn't get a confirmation from the ship, Marie. I specifically asked for two female post-doctoral Science Officers who were healthy, fertile and early in their breeding cycle."

The Senator suppressed a smile as she took a sip of her coffee. Despite her many visits to human worlds, Tala knew so little about their customs. "I suspect that those specifications would have raised a few eyebrows on the Kelsorian ship, Tala. Instead, I translated your request as ably as I could, asking that our visitors be young and fit enough to engage in strenuous physical activities. I was not able to specify their gender without arousing suspicion. But they understood the need for a scientific exchange."

"And what did we get? Two males?"

"The Kelsorians have not sent down their pictures yet. But they seemed eager to make contact, so if the first two aren't satisfactory, we can ask for more guests to attend the Conjugational."

"After all this time, it seems inconceivable that men could be in charge of a ship such as that one. Its power source is already the envy of our scientists."

"The real problem is not to offend them with the Conjugational. It's easy to forget that our rites are somewhat unusual compared to other worlds. As is our heritage."

"Damn Layla and her demands to make this a full blown event for the Royals. Doesn't she realize what's at stake here?"

"She's your daughter, Tala. By adoption if not by birth."

"And an unmanageable one. A throwback to a violent and prideful past."

The Senator got wearily to her feet. "She's young, Tala. Give her time."



"Assuming the Church gives us that time. I've heard rumors that they are using some of the *galan* that the goddess gave them so long ago. Creating a holy warrior and all that nonsense."

"We Gwyndylyn are strong and we have numbers on our side. The Queen will not let them prevail."

"Yet she is bound to the vote of the people. Their belief in the Founding Letter is still strong, even among our people. The Church is abusing its trust by turning the people away from us."

"Then you must arrange a meeting with the Goddess. Explain it to her. She is above the politics that rule our lives."

Tala cursed. "You tell me how, and I will. She's as much a will-o-the-wisp as the rest of her kind. Except for our annual *Joining* and those supposed contacts the Church has with her, no one knows how to contact her."

"It is said she lives among us, ever judging the true believers by our actions, not our words."

"True believers," Tala scoffed. "God is watching. You sound like that damned Cleric."

The Senator walked slowly toward the door, her feet hurting. "The Church has made a religion out of the Goddess' simple rules. Treat all women with fairness and equality. Create a sanctuary for the oppressed of our gender."

"If only they'd stopped there."

"Do not confuse their dogma with our need to remember our roots, Tala. Humility is an asset. Arrogance and pride are the first steps toward anarchy and war."

"I have conquered worlds, defeating the Heathens wherever they are found. Yet I'm living here on Rostran, leading the Gwyndylyn in our pursuit of peace. Does that not prove my loyalty to Her? My humility?"

"It does, at least for now. Convince Layla to act the same way and the Goddess will smile on you."

"You ask the impossible, old friend," Tala smiled.

The Senator smiled softly in return. She opened the heavy door with a weary hand, and passed through it to the darkness beyond.

## Chapter 4

(Date: 1052-11-01, 07:28 ST)

Alisa stared at her reflection as she stood in her ship's cabin a half hour later. Kalik had been right about one thing. Compared to the Rostran women,

she looked washed out and under-endowed. A strange worry for a Velorian, but she'd never put much stock in her appearance. Especially on the ship, where she had to keep her pheromones dampened. That meant living on the edge of energy exhaustion so as to minimize orgone production.

Far from thinking of herself as attractive, she'd always felt like a freak for having been born with a P1's extreme physical talents. Her colleagues in the Physics Section, all advanced degree-holders in Astral Physics like herself, would have real trouble dealing with the realization of how she'd gathered that bit of 'extra' data while they were diving through Cygnias. A thousand gravities had tugged at her body from every direction, yet she'd been able to hold the recording disk in the neutrino slipstream for more than ten long seconds, and then place it deep inside her vagina to protect it from the star-like heat as she penetrated the plasma wall. A unique advantage to being female.

Yet despite this secret bit of exuberance outside the ship, her fondest dream was to be considered as one of the guys on the Science Deck. To be recognized for her brains, and not just what her body could do.

She sighed as she turned to consider her slender profile. She could easily fix her flat bustline, although not without some dramatics. She needed to absorb a bunch of energy. While fat went to other women's hips, energy went straight to her breasts. Besides, she was tired by having to hide in the corners like some kind of drug addict as she siphoned off a few kilowatts here and there from the ship's power grid.

On the other hand, Kalik and the rest of the crew would definitely notice the change. Perhaps she could fake it by claiming she was wearing prosthetics. The latest thing in fake breasts were completely realistic. She smiled as she thought about how she and Kalik would laugh about her outrageous figure.

The door chimed to interrupt her thoughts. She quickly pulled her shorts and t-shirt back on and answered it. It was a supply crewman.

"Cap'n's orders, Ma'am. An unmanned supply Bot from Rostran just docked with us. Captain said to bring the package right to you."

She thanked him as she closed the door. The package contained three items of clothing. The first was a white gown made of a semi-sheer fabric. It was filmy and insubstantial, almost like tissue paper, not to mention having an exotically short hem.

The second had a slightly longer skirt but with an erotically low-cut top that left her shoulders and back bare. It was made of ultra-thin leather, and was glove-soft. Trying it on first, she loved the way it clung to her skin. Once she had her figure back, she'd look awesome in it.

The third outfit was a spiderweb of polished silver film. It encircled her breasts but made no attempt to cover anything. A strip of metal film formed a thong bottom so narrow that it revealed the edges of her pubic bone, but managed to cover just enough to maintain essential modesty. The entire outfit

was about a half dozen square inches in total, but was remarkably secure once she got it on.

She went back and tried the white gown on. A glance in the mirror said she wouldn't be able to bend over an inch, but the hemline made her legs look amazingly long. The top was no less exotic. Fitting her like a second skin, it put her protruding nipples on display. She wondered how her prosthetic story would work. Did they really make them with nipples as large hers? She shrugged at that strange thought, deciding she could always claim her prosthetic was special order, although that might provoke a question or two she didn't want to answer.

She took the white outfit off to look at herself again. It would all be so simple if she went down to Rostran alone. Power up, go to their ceremony dressed like this, and then burn off any excess orgone before she got back. With her natural Velorian talents, she could easily handle whatever the Rostran men had in mind. But no, Durgin had ordered she and Kalik to go together, knowing full well that this assignment would likely make it impossible for her to keep her secret.

Did Durgin think that revealing her racial origin was going to encourage her to return to his bed? She doubted she'd even stay on the ship if people started to treat her differently. Few men could handle the heady mix of godlike worship and over-the-top eroticism that would come with their realization of her racial origin.

Even worse, Durgin was using Kalik as a pawn in his little game. Kalik was so incredibly naive when it came to women and politics.

Thinking of Kalik, she wondered what he was up to. She turned to look toward the Tank. It wasn't polite, but she occasionally used her tachyon vision to look around the ship, making sure she stayed ahead of everyone else. She opened her eyes fractionally larger, and concentrated on staring through the metal wall in front of her. It slowly faded to transparency, as did the additional bulkheads that separated her cabin from the Tank. Strangely, the image wasn't as clear as she was used to, and she had to really strain to see what was on his screen. She promptly broke into giggles as she saw him staring at life-sized holographic images of Rostran women. Their poses and clothing would have been considered indecent on most worlds.

The image he lingered over seemed to be from an ordinary weather broadcast. He pressed a button and Alisa's image replaced the weather reporter's on the screen. She recognized the holo as one he'd taken after a stopover at Terdyne. She was dressed in the tailored uniform of a Science Officer, her hair still colored ash blonde from the unauthorized dive she'd made through that wormhole with Cher'ee.

She rolled on her back and looked up at the ceiling, remembering how she'd run into Cher'ee. The *Flame* had put in at the Enlightenment world for R&R simply because it was on the way, and Alisa had gone shopping during a

few days' shore leave. She'd worn her black wig, of course. Not much chance they'd be looking for her there, but why take that chance? If the local Protector learned of her presence, she'd be subject to arrest, and imprisonment in a gold cage for the journey back to Velor.

It could only have been fate, a chance in a billion, that she was confronted on the street by her old friend from Reigel Five. Alisa had panicked for a moment when Cher'ee accosted her, but then the young Protector had smiled.

"Not to worry," she'd said. "I'm off duty. And even if I were on duty..."

Even so, she'd set the ground rules for their conversation: no talk of official business, no talk of the political situation back home on Velor. That left family, but Cher'ee didn't have anything current, being on the way home now from her first assignment on a distant world she refused to name.

What she did know was that Naomi was back in the good graces of the Foreign Service and been assigned to another embassy, but the location hadn't been announced yet.

"Maybe it had something to do with James," she'd said. "He's in the Army now, you know."

Actually, Alisa hadn't. She hadn't had any word from home. She hadn't presumed to seek any, although she might have. A form of self-punishment, perhaps.

Conversation turned to physics, and it was as if the floodgates opened. They talked until dawn, mostly about wormholes and the mathematics of the complex gravitational fields.

"Want to take a dive?" Cher'ee offered as they lay on a grassy slope outside the local University, watching the sunrise.

"You're serious? Right now?"

"Of course. You've still got two days before you report back. Plenty of time."

"Skietra, I'd love that!"

Alisa was holding onto Cher'ee's ankles a day later as they went into a hole, her eyes wide with wonder. The gravity and heat were punishing, the pain almost more than she could endure. And then she'd lost her grip on her guide... only to discover that she didn't need it. As if by instinct, all that she had ever learned about wormholes came to her mind, came to her body. She had felt some of that the first time, at Reigel Five, but she hadn't known enough to trust it. She'd convinced herself since then that it would be different next time. And now it was.

The trip back through the hole was even more painful, but she never lost control, never needed her friend to come to her aid. No matter the pain; the

chance to see the inner workings of a hole again with her own eyes was worth it. But for the first time, she regretted not taking her Rites, for Cher'ee showed no effects from their dives. Her own skin and hair were bleached almost white.

She didn't mind the comments on the way back to the *Flame*. She wore her pale coloration as a badge of honor. Everyone else on the crew assumed she'd just lightened it, as they'd heard rumors that she was having an affair with the Captain. It wasn't unusual for a Kelsorian woman having a shipboard romance to change her appearance. All part of becoming that new person who temporarily put her shore-based relationships on hold.

But no one would ever have guessed that her bleaching agent was nuclear plasma. Star stuff.



She blinked her eyes back to the present. There had been something about being around Cher'ee that made her feel so light and tingly. An attraction that was more than just friendship, but also more than she wished to act on. Pushing that misplaced thought away, she rolled back on her stomach to study Kalik. He was flicking back and forth between that picture and one of her in her usual shorts and t-shirt, then finally back to dwell on the nearly naked Rostran woman.

What was going through Kalik's head? Was he comparing her figure to a Rostran's?

She cursed under her breath. That's the last thing she wanted him focused on. Her experiences with human men over the years made her certain that revealing her background to Kalik would instantly change her status from colleague to sex object. Velorians and hyper-eroticism were tightly linked in most humans' minds, thanks to those exploitative z-rated holo programs that were all over the galaxy.

With humans, sexual desire always changed everything. Men became erratic and emotional. Possessive. She still didn't understand the last. There was desire on Velor, even jealousy, but it rarely unhinged Velorians the way it did humans. On Velor sex was just, well, sex, and if one person wasn't

interested, there were plenty of other partners. Working out and having sex, often interleaved during private sessions in the gym, were just pleasant ways to keep one's body flexible and relaxed. People didn't deny themselves the pleasure and then spend their time fantasizing about it, turning it into some kind of religious event.

Like she was now?

She sighed as she realized she was starting to become as inhibited as a human. Living among them was so burdensome for her in some ways, yet she craved their company. They had a creativity and excitement about life that was absent from Velor's cool perfection. Their insatiable curiosity and the short lives they lived drove them to an intensity of experience that she envied - even though those same intense emotions could make her feel as if every conversation was a trip on tiptoe through a minefield.

She considered going back to Durgin's cabin and negotiating, Velorian style. Namely, by leaving her clothes at the door. He'd find someone else for the Rostran mission once she exhausted him in bed and offered to continue doing the same. That would be easy enough, for they'd always been good together in bed.

The problem was that he'd soon be begging for commitment again. No matter what he'd said about his so-called 'temporary insanity', he'd lost all control of his emotions. He'd talked about love. Of her being the one woman in the universe for him. Probably the same thing he'd said to his first three wives. No, she told herself stubbornly, she wasn't going back to Durgin to endure another torrent of infatuation, no matter how convenient it might be. He'd gone way over the line with his marriage proposal. He was older than her mother, for Skietra's sake!

She cradling her chin on her hands as she watched Kalik surfing through the Rostran Net at his top speed, as if more information on their style of dress, or the lack of it, would explain why he was on this mission. He was so much the opposite of Durgin. Bookish, geeky, and brilliant where Durgin was hard, driven and demanding. But Durgin was also gallant and romantic and sexy, words that Kalik had only an academic understanding of. Even worse, Kalik was too young to deal with a Velorian's open concept of sexuality. Human men grew up very slowly, emotionally at least, and a young man's infatuation would likely drive a sense of possessiveness that would make her crazy. As nutty as it seemed, humans were always intimidated, threatened and hurt if she slept with someone else. And an inexperienced man like Kalik would suffer the worst.

The meteoric rise of Kalik's career was the opposite. He was already published in several influential journals, and he'd been enticed into the Survey Service with the grade of Senior Lieutenant. He'd sacrificed a lot of the usual rites of growing up in his quest for academic achievement. Alisa was pretty sure he was still a virgin.

She briefly debated just walking over to the Tank and telling him she was a Velorian. Maybe float around in mid-air to convince him. He'd be startled at first, but then he'd try to help. Kalik was logical and objective, almost painfully so. He'd understand.

She smirked at that thought. Sure he would. He'd take it totally in stride that his best friend was a member of a race that half the people on Kelsor thought were descendents of the gods, and the other half thought were wanton sex objects. She'd explain that it was also perfectly O.K if half the Conjugational party fucked her brains out because that's what her body had been created for in the first place anyway.

He was a scientist. He'd understand.

Right!

Instead, he'd become protective of her, both as a friend and the newest member of his department. He wouldn't understand her eagerness to please the other members of the Conjugational, or the lack of consequences for her. She couldn't get pregnant. She couldn't catch a disease.

He knew nothing about women, let alone the subtleties of sexual relationships, human or otherwise, and dealing with a Velorian's overreaching sexuality was not a good place to start learning. A friend of her mother's had once said that human relationships with Velorians were to be reserved for the true experts. She interpreted that to mean older, secure men, although Durgin fit that billing, and he'd fallen into the exact trap her mother had warned her about.

What she really needed was an objective and realistic partner, a man who understood the difference between romantic and physical love. How would poor Kalik react as he watched the Velorian in her come out to play? The way she'd become the center of a growing orgy, extending her pheromones to embrace everyone in the room. Inviting them all into her arms. She shook her head at that thought.

It was inconceivable that his emotions could survive being a part of that. He'd become jealous and probably intimidated. Or even worse, he'd grow as infatuated with her as Durgin. He'd fall under the influence of her pheromones, her scent compelling him to shed his inhibitions and join the orgy, to make love to her like everyone else, and then become disgusted with himself after.

Or he might go the other way, growing angry at the beginning of the Conjugational and refusing to participate, even going so far as to leave. That would be a grievous transgression of local customs.

And finally, when they got back to the ship, between his guilt and embarrassment, he'd look at her completely differently. He might even go so far as to have her reassigned from the Tank. She closed her eyes and cursed. Damn these human men and the way they wore their hearts on their sleeves.

She looked at herself in the mirror again. Taking a deep breath, she cupped her breasts to make them look larger. They were perfectly round and firm, her nipples so very hard. Just small. She made her decision. If she was doomed to attend some royal orgy, and endure all the consequences that came afterward, then by Skietra she was going to enjoy it. That meant she was going to look good. Damn good.

She smiled. How absurd was it anyway for a Velorian to be struggling with the problem of being too blonde and flat-chested? Holding onto that ridiculous thought long enough to chuckle at the absurdity, she decided there was but one way to solve this problem. She began by pulling on the one piece of indestructible Velorian clothing she owned, a black nightgown designed to survive her sleeping twists and turns. She then opened her door and ran barefoot down the empty corridor toward the Armory.

She still cringed when she remembered the embarrassing way she'd demonstrated the Klav'en's purpose to Durgin when she'd first come on board the *Flame*. But it hadn't been her vanity during a shore leave that Admiral Tso had in mind when he transferred the Klav'en to the *Flame*. But like all assignments, she intended to excel at this mission, and the definition of success was building goodwill with the Rostrans. Which meant playing the game their way.

She struggled to use her troubled tachyon vision, but was able to avoid being seen as she slipped through the outer door of the Armory. A huge vault confronted her. Damn it. In her confusion, she hadn't considered how she was going to actually get the Klav'en. The last time she was here, Durgin had opened it.

There was only one way to do it without being discovered. She narrowed her eyes and struggled to look through the hardened steel to image the locking mechanism. Minutes passed before she found the mechanical tumblers. Unlike the more common electronic locks, the vault used old-fashioned tumblers. The Armory had designed to be operational even if ship's power was down or the ship was damaged from EMP. She began twisting the combination dial as she watched and listened to the tumblers. Child's play for someone with her powers of observation and hearing. When the tumblers finally clicked satisfyingly into place, she opened the heavy door, and wrapped a canvas bag around the Klav'en to walk quickly toward the loading dock.

Minutes later, the radiation warning alarms sounded on the bridge. The effect came and went before the instruments could triangulate the source, other than to say that the unidentified burst was very close to the *Flame*. And that it had been very, very powerful.



# Chapter 5

*(Date: 1052-11-01, 08:10 ST)*

Alisa floated crookedly through her cabin door and slammed it closed, pressing her back against it. She felt like collapsing, but she had to concentrate on floating, as her body was far too hot to touch the floor, only the heat-resistant sheets of her bed. A glance up at the mirror revealed waves of heat coming off her chest, and her lower body was still glowing, just barely below the threshold of the alarm sensors. Tracing her fingers down to touch herself, she was startled when the oil on her fingertips burst into flame. She was still wickedly hot inside.



She closed her eyes tightly as she struggled to control the tingling burn, but it was almost more than she could bear, especially the way it kept trying to turn into something else. The Klav'en had sent a wave of star-like heat through her body as she'd been forced to take the muzzle inside herself to protect the ship. At full power level, the weapon delivered enough energy to vaporize one

of the shuttles in a blink of an eye. Far from a blink of her eyes, she'd absorbed a long three second burst.

She took a deep breath as she tried to push the growing tendrils of desire aside. Energizing herself this way was horribly embarrassing and disturbingly erotic. If anyone had seen her crudely impaling herself on the weapon, creating an matter/anti-matter burst inside herself, let alone observing the way she was glowing inside now, she would be mortified. A woman's innermost self was supposed to be a delicate flower, not a place to smother nuclear-grade energy bursts. Her mother had always told her that there were things that ordinary humans shouldn't even try to imagine. This was definitely one of them.

Fortunately, the conversion to orgone quickly filled out her figure. She sprawled on her back, staring up at the ceiling as she pondered for not the first time the weird Velorian connection between heat and sexual desire. The Galen had engineered the Velorian race to embrace star-like heat as the ultimate sexual turn-on. Was that some kind of kinky sexual thrill for a Galen? Or was nuclear-grade heat a requirement for reproduction of the Galen species? Either way, she didn't think she could endure the embarrassment if other members of the crew knew how she got turned on.

She sat back up and looked into the mirror. She looked very Rostran-like now. Voluptuous even. Her eyes were also glowing brighter than usual, a side-effect of being energy engorged. Like something from *Dune*, that old Terran science fiction novel she'd studied in Post- Classic Comparative Literature. In the darkened atmosphere of a Rostran conjugal ceremony, the blue glow would draw every eye to hers.

A tingle of unbidden excitement raced through her body at that thought. She briefly teased herself with an image of a dozen virile and physically powerful men pleasing her in every way. If she understood what she'd read on the Rostran Net, a man's primary duty on Rostran was to bring sexual pleasure to women, and their capability to do so had been genetically-enhanced. A tiny thrill ran through her body at that thought. If true, then Durgin was at least right about one thing. She was the perfect member of the crew to participate in such a ceremony.

But gen-teched supermen or not, she couldn't risk leaving her native strength intact. Having the physical strength of thousands was a distinct disadvantage during sexual ecstasy. A moment of too much enthusiasm, an overly passionate embrace, holding on a bit too tightly with her legs and . . . and she didn't want to think about that.

She walked over to her dresser to dig around in her jewelry case, looking for the toys she and Durgin had shared. The belly chain would slow her energy flows and reduce her strength by a factor of several hundred. The heavy necklace would finish the job, leaving her with little more than human strength.

She dropped the heavy necklace into her travel bag and fastened just the delicate belly chain around her small waist. She snapped it closed, and was immediately assaulted with an overwhelming rush of prickly desire. It washed across her like a hot wave, leaving her legs weak and her eyes fluttering. Unlike the strengthening burn of energy absorption, this arousal was cheap and crude and immediate. She fell to her knees, struggling not to scream as her nipples burned agonizingly, and became so hard that they tented her top like small thumbs. She reached up to hold herself with a desperate strength as the gold's wicked effects wormed their way into her most sensitive places, chasing her Velorian strength away as it went. She arched her back and held her breath as she stared wide-eyed at the ceiling, holding on with the last of her willpower until the hot rush mellowed into the faint and persisting buzz of a golden high.

She emptied her lungs with a whoosh and started to breathe again. She still had many times the strength of an ordinary human, but there was little danger of her injuring anyone by accident now. The gold buzz gradually faded into a pleasant glow, promising to make it easy for her to enjoy the crude, naked, lustful and probably violent sex of the Rostrans. She smiled as she listened to herself, realizing that those last words were just her intoxication talking. She entertained a brief fantasy about Rostran supermen, their equipment legendary, their endurance endless. If they lived up to even half her imagination, her shore leave was going to be memorable. She envisioned a dozen virile men vying for the chance to please her, wrestling naked in the middle of the floor, the winner of each round exhausting himself against her body.

She cursed and pushed that wicked thought away. It was pagan, almost Arion, and very wrong. Clearly the gold intoxication was starting to affect her emotions. It was going to be hard to remain analytical if she kept having these kinds of daydreams.

But why should she worry about that, she rationalized. Durgin clearly wanted to expose her, and the whole crew was going to discover it sooner or later. Kalik would adapt to her expressive sexuality. She'd just move from her room to his and convince him that she liked him the best. That wouldn't be hard. She was a goddess incarnate. She could make any man love her.

**No!**

She shook her head as she gripped her fists with her remaining strength. That thought was so ridiculous. She was anything but a goddess. And she had little control over men, other than to induce them to do something they'd likely regret the next morning. Most importantly, she wasn't Durgin's pawn. Most important of all, she wasn't going to ruin her relationship with Kalik, nor was she going to let Durgin take all the credit for currying favor with the Rostrans. If she started to act like a Velorian, then the Rostrans would undoubtedly ask for her return as a condition for further negotiation. She'd be

the sexual favor that would cement Kelsor to Rostran. It was exactly the kind of diplomacy that well-meaning Velorians had too often been trapped into.

She was Kelsorian now, not Velorian. By a pledge of citizenship and an oath if not by birth. That meant she had to follow her Captain's orders. It also meant she had to hide portions of her true nature. This was certainly one of them.

That soft voice of temptation spoke again. She was a P1, not an ordinary Velorian. She could truly control Durgin and the other men. The crude compulsion of a P1's pheromones were more powerful than any human could resist. And if she had to take a few men to her bed each night to get her way, well, there were far greater challenges that a Velorian had to face in life. Far less pleasant ones too.

"No, damn it," she shouted out loud as she caught herself in the midst of another misplaced thought. The gold was talking now. She took a deep breath and focused her thoughts. Working with Kalik on this wormhole was more important than anything else. Exploring the implications of time travel in the temporal warp was a dream of a lifetime. That was her only goal. The only one. "*The only one*," she whispered to herself over and over.

She cringed at the sound of her own voice. Soft as honey, it was the voice of sweet seduction. What did her Velorian genes make her? A brilliant scientist who helped solve the problems of practical time travel? Or a woman who could conquer an entire world with her beauty and sexuality? A scientist or some kind of superhuman warrior? Which image of her would her shipmates see once they knew the truth? Would they even worship her as had happened so often during the first millennia of the Protectorate? Or would they spurn her, the analytical nature of the Kelsorians concluding that her blonde naiveté was its own curse?

She sighed as she combed her fingers through her hair, letting the silky, sensual feeling of the long strands wash away her worrying thoughts. Terran sexuality was so incredibly complicated. Especially the way physics, emotions, logic and libido got all mixed up. Solving the mysteries of the universe was easier than sorting out a man's emotions.

She wished once again that she'd never been born Velorian. It was so hard trying to explain everything to men who rarely had the patience to try to listen -- probably because their life expectancies were only an eighth of her own -- and who, even if they did listen and understand, could never make proper love to her anyway.

She held herself more tightly. This gold was starting to drive her crazy. Maybe if she burned off just a little of the energy she could think clearly again.

## Chapter 6

(Date: 1052-11-01, 08:40 ST)

Lionel DeCamp was the low man on the totem pole in the Culture Section. Somebody from each section had to remain on board while the others did field work, and he was it for Culture. Even worse, he had nothing to do except monitor what the rest of his section did.

Because of the sensitivities of a First Contact, DeCamp was supposed to work only under direction of Lieutenant Hegson, the section chief, or sub-chief Ensign Davis, but he chafed at the enforced idleness. *Can't hurt to just look at the data*, he thought, and no sooner had that thought come to mind than it directed his feet to the Tank - which was deserted now. Physics Section always had first call on the Tank, and Lieutenant Kalik and Ensign Liddell had monopolized its time for months now. Culture and Biology had to squeeze in time when they could. A time like now.

He looked into the iris scanner and was cleared to enter. No problem there. Cleared to jack in too. What he wasn't cleared to do was initiate any new analysis threads in the neural nets. No doubt there'd be hell to pay if he was found out, but there was no easy way to monitor the myriad threads of inquiry that the nets were working on. And he couldn't resist pursuing one of his pet interests.

Ensign Alisa Liddell. Or more precisely, her background.

He'd chosen Supremis culture as his area of study for his last ratings review, and he'd spent more than a few hours ogling the young ensign, comparing her to the race of people he'd been studying. He'd since formed a few of his own fantasies, dreams even, and after studying a log of her unusual EVA's, he'd hypothesized that she was a Supremis who was working undercover on their ship. Proving that hypothesis would be far more difficult than flirting with his fantasies, so much so that he'd been afraid to try. If his guess was wrong, Liddell might get hurt. If he was right, he would be revealing something she obviously wanted to keep hidden. It wasn't smart to piss off a Supremis.

He focused instead on using the Tank. It was smart -- artificially intelligent even, and it could learn. It could find anything related to a subject, not just to a keyword or words, and could scan the entire electromagnetic spectrum to mine data. It invented new ways to associate data and search for new data when it couldn't come to a conclusion with the data it had.

Hand on the biolink, DeCamp reluctantly started with his Supremis assignment, reviewing the work he'd collated in the Tank. There were lots of data paths and potential cross-links, but very little useful analysis. The Tank seemed deliberately starved for data on Velorians, almost like someone had been removing it. He pulled up the Culture search topics, and was amazed to find that Ensign Liddell had also been digging in the Supremis files. So had her boss, Lieutenant Kalik. His preliminary inquiry had looked at a single subject, correlating the Conjugation rite with the fabled Velorian Rites, without probing

the Tank's suggestions for cross-links. Liddell had been more interested in Rostran fashions and their correlation to Velorian fashion.

DeCamp unconsciously licked his lips as he considered whether Ensign Liddell's interest in Culture might extend to a Culture tech, and then snapped back to reality. Not likely, he mused, and resolved to go on to his own research interests. She and the Captain were rumored to be an item. Damn the privileges of rank anyway.

He kicked the Tank off in a new direction, asking it to review parallels to Rostran mythology, something of little or no interest to Hegson, Davis and the others. Their first priorities were the sociology and economic structures.

His results were disappointing at first. It seemed almost too generic, given the unusual nature of Rostran society - patriarchal overtones, for example, when the social structure was clearly matriarchal; and no reference to off-world origins, when the natives were clearly of human descent. Garden variety origin myths, gods and goddesses, heroic quests.

Bored, he returned to replaying Kalik's inquiries, and came across his history file. He watched open-mouthed as the Tank flashed the voluptuous images and lurid descriptions of a Conjugation before him. It had definitely been a mistake to pass up this line of inquiry. When he got to Kalik's comparison of a Rostran's eyes, figure and height to Liddell's, he slipped into one of his own fantasies. He imagined greeting Ensign Liddell in the old Velorian manner and confirming that she was one of those blonde goddesses. That sparked some more fantasizing, and he amused himself by asking the Tank to cross-reference Rostran's actual history and culture to Supremis history. The neural net returned in seconds with something that stopped him cold.

A 94% R-squared correlation!

Junior ratings like himself never disturbed the captain. They went through channels. But his superiors were isolated off ship. No way this could wait to go through channels. This had to be an exception. He'd have to risk it. He got on the Com, and reached Durgin in his quarters.

"Culture Tech Lionel DeCamp, Sir and Captain. We have a serious problem."

"Report it to your Lieutenant, DeCamp. Cultural briefing is at 0900."

Before Durgin could sign off, DeCamp made a desperate plea. "Sir, it's a matter of life and death for a crew member."

Durgin's eyes narrowed. "Whose life or death?"

"Ensign Liddell's, Sir."

Durgin responded with a sharp intake of breath, but continued on in his gruff fashion. "And why should the Ensign be in any danger?"

"Something I've guessed about her, Sir. And something I've seen in the Tank. Something about Rostran."

There was silence on the comm for a long moment.

"Report to me in thirty minutes in my cabin, DeCamp. Say nothing of this to anyone else. *Anyone.*"

## Chapter 7

"Any idea what that pulse was?" Commander Daniel Pestrov asked the engineer who was manning the EM sensor panel. "Some kind of Rostran scan?"

"No, Sir. Computer would have locked on if it were that far away. The region of probable origin overlaps the ship itself."

"Which is obviously a fluke. If it was that close, we wouldn't be here now. The signature was consistent with a matter/anti-matter detonation."

"Which is exactly the kind of weapon the Vendorians sell, even to the d. Klav'ens. They kill Starships with those kind of things."

The hackles stood up on Pestrov's back just from the mention of that horrific weapon. He'd seen pictures of a derelict ship as it was vaporized by a Klav'en burst. "Are all the Rostran satellites in their normal orbits? No stellar distortions which would indicate a cloaked ship?"

Pestrov shook his head. "First things I checked, Commander. No evidence of any kind of particle weapons in orbit or other ships in the system. Quietest place I've ever seen, in fact. The closest thing to a weapon is a high-energy source that's located inside a building in the capital city. But this burst definitely didn't come from there."

"O.K, so we have a mystery. Keep scanning the planet surface. I don't trust these Rostrans."

Pestrov walked over to examine the solar sensor panel. The surface of the sun was covered in red dots of possible flare locations. There seemed to be more than he'd seen an hour ago. "I need Solar up here to run a detailed analysis. I don't like the way the sun is starting to sequence."

"Yes, sir," one of the technicians said. He started speaking softly into his mike.

Pestrov looked around the bridge one more time, and decided that things were well enough under control that he could afford to go to breakfast. Jennie would be off duty by now, and he was looking forward to having a few quiet minutes with his wife during the shift change.

## Chapter 8

*(Date: 1052-11-01, 08:50 ST)*

Alisa was running late by the time she finally started to get dressed. She'd decided to wear the white outfit down to the planet, despite the precariously short hemline. She slipped into the dress, and was reassured when she found that the fabric was amazingly strong, despite looking and feeling like it was made from wet tissue paper. Which was good considering that her nipples stood out like tiny thumbs, threatening to tear the fabric. She took a deep breath, but it didn't rip. So far, so good.

She pulled on a black wig that was nearly as long as her natural hair. It was actually an advanced prosthetic that bound itself to her scalp and couldn't be removed if you didn't know exactly how.

Hoping to avoid too much reaction to her new figure, and very self-conscious about the size of her nipples, she finished dressing by pulling on a silver Alecan cloak that reached her ankles. Then, after grabbing her communicator and some small instruments from her desk and stuffing them into her bag, she turned the lights out and she headed out the door.

"Wow!" Kalik commented as she walked through the door of the shuttle a few minutes later. He made a show of shielding his eyes as if from the sun. "Is that really you, Alisa?"

She opened her silver cloak and tossed her head, the windblown look of her black wig making her look a bit wild as it framed her face. "My disguise. Do I look like a Rostran?"





Kalik's eyes opened wide, their focus dropping to her chest. He'd secretly admired her flawless skin and golden hair for months, and those incredible eyes, not to mention the cutest legs he'd ever seen, but now he was staring at a figure that a Rostran would be proud of. His mouth suddenly went dry as he admired the way the sheer fabric clung skintight to her high breasts. And those nipples... He licked his lips and tried to think of something appropriate to say. Something sophisticated.

Unfortunately, the first thing that came out was, "You... you... really fit into that dress really well."

He grimaced as he listened to his lame words. He scrambled to find the right words, but instead used all his mental faculties to lift his eyes from her chest. "I mean, that's a really good disguise. It's so very, ah, Rostran."

Alisa smiled as she tossed her hair. "You like the hair, huh?"

"Yeah. Totally the hair." His eyes said otherwise.

Alisa smirked as she pulled her robe back on. "They're just a pair of those new prosthetics. I assume you aren't one of those men who get confused when they have to deal with a woman's IQ and her bust size at the same time?"

Kalik managed a nervous laugh of his own. Was she making fun of him?

"But what the hell," she shrugged, "as you said earlier, we're still just a couple of geeks from the Tank no matter what we wear. Right?"

The airlock snapped shut before Kalik could decide how to answer. "Yes" would mean she was ordinary, which she definitely wasn't. But any other answer would imply that he was more impressed with her than he wanted to let on right now. His thoughts spun. He had no experience with this kind of banter. Especially not with a subordinate. Fortunately, the floor shifted beneath him before he could get himself in trouble. A soft puffing of jets pushed the shuttle out of the bay into the vacuum of space.

"Fasten your harnesses nice and tight," the pilot called over the intercom. "Some serious G's coming up in thirty seconds."

They got busy attaching the half dozen straps and bio-monitors that bound them to the shuttle. The antigrav converter began whining beneath their feet, building upward into a painful scream before thankfully going supersonic.

"Here we go," the pilot warned. A silent surge of force slammed them back into their seats at 4 G's.

"Well, at least you aren't blonde anymore," Kalik continued. "But get some sun on that outfit and you'll blind everyone. What is it? Polished silver?"

"On an Ensign's salary? Hardly. Just cheap polymer, but it's the best I could do to dress for the occasion. And speaking of dressing..."

He followed her eyes as she glanced meaningfully down at the tight leather trousers he now wore. They were made of the same paper-thin leather as her second outfit. He blushed and resisted the urge to hold his hands in front of his crotch. "These pants the Rostrans sent up feel like they're painted on me."

Alisa laughed as she saw him squirm. "Well, we are going to their most important social function, so we have to dress the part."

"I don't know where these people came from, but wherever it was, it wasn't an inhibited world. This clothing is designed to show off everything they've got."

"With their gen-teched bodies, what do you expect?" Alisa shrugged, her robe opening just enough to show an expanse of bare leg. "They've worked hard to look like that."

Kalik grunted as he struggled to breathe. Alisa smiled at him. "Mostly 6 G's on the way down. 8.5 at the peak. This is still the easy part."

"I hate shuttles," Kalik grimaced. "I hate big planets with their thick atmospheres."

"Look on the bright side. We're going to have an adventure."

"I hate adventures."

Ignoring the mounting G-forces, Alisa turned her head to look curiously at him. "We're going to a ceremony more exotic than anything else in the Cultural archives and you're complaining? Beautiful and willing women everywhere, all intent in sharing the joy of the Conjugational. How could that be boring?"

He gritted his teeth against the building G's. "I didn't say boring. I'm just... well, not... in very good shape. Too many days on the... couch... in the... Tank."

"Well, once the ceremony gets under way, just find a dark corner and try not to get involved."

"And you... are going to do... what?"

Her voice grew soft. "I suspect I'm not going to have the luxury of hiding."

"Don't worry. I'll take care... of you," Kalik struggled to say, a note of concern in his voice. "Friends... we stick together. Right?"

Alisa leaned her head back as the G's built further yet. "I rather think you're the one who needs taking care of, Kalik. I'm not exactly who you think I am."

"I know."

Her eyes opened wide as she turned to look at him again. "You know exactly what?"

"That you weren't... born... on Kelsor," he grunted as the G's punished him. "That parts of your... personnel record... are... classified. Including the... the part about... racial origin."

Alisa said nothing for a long moment. "Well then, where am I from?"

"Reigel... an Enlightenment world. I found... links to... there."

"Reigel, huh?"

"The world of snow... with that one continent... populated by ... Aryans. Which explains... your looks. I think you... ran away... from Aryans... because you don't think... like... the others." He paused to gasp for air. The G's were mounting. "But you... still have... an Aryan's... exclusiveness... at least in... mating. Which is why... don't play... ship's games."

Alisa was amused by Kalik's impeccable logic, even if he was totally wrong. "I see you've definitely been thinking this one through. Why didn't you say something?"

"You seemed... want to keep... secrets." The G's were really heavy now.

Alisa thought again of her own people. Was Kalik really so wrong? She of course knew all about that Aryan clan which had settled on Reigel from Old Earth, their gene pool untainted, or so they described it. Blue eyes, blonde hair. They were unabashed racists, devoted to physical perfection and intellectual elitism. Given their insufferably superior attitude, they were not well thought of by the rest of the Reigelians. Or anyone else for that matter. As Velorian Ambassador, her mother Naomi had struggled to deal with them, particularly since the Aryans were convinced that the Velorians were part of their heritage. They claimed openly that Naomi and her children were proof of their own Nordic genetic superiority. Alisa had seen more than enough of that arrogant attitude to sicken her. It was one of the reasons she'd denied her own heritage. She wanted nothing to do with racial supremacy, either the human or the Supremis kind.

"So, Alisa. Am I right? About you... being... an Aryan?"

"You got Reigel right, but otherwise, no."

"Yes and no? Now... I'm... really intrigued."

"Have you said anything to anyone else about this?"

"Don't... worry," Kalik said firmly, trying to shake his head. "I'll take your... secret... to my grave. Whatever... is." He turned his head painfully in his seat to look into her eyes. He felt his cheeks flapping and his body sagging from the punishing effects of the G's, but she showed no sign of any of that. "So what...I win... for almost... guessing?"

Alisa's voice was barely audible over the roar of atmospheric reentry. "Perhaps an even bigger surprise, Kalik. One that even you can't imagine."

## Chapter 9

*(Date: 1052-11-01, 09:00 ST)*

"Who are they sending down?"

Cleric Sundanjan studied the Scan display in her office, located as it was on the top level of the Church of Rostran. The church was a hundred story tall edifice of stone and marble that was located at the center of the city. "Two Kelsorians, Senator. One male, one female. Both young and attractive I'm told. The Captain of the vessel said it would honor him if they could be included in the Prince's Conjugational."

"Do we have their images?"

"Yes, Senator. Just transmitted as their shuttle departed the mother ship. The Cleric's display lit up with Kalik's image.

"The man is not impressive. Too bad they wasted a seat on him. The woman?"

The screen changed to Alisa's image, taken as she entered the shuttle. The Senator's right eyebrow lifted. "She is quite beautiful."

The Cleric frowned. "Beautiful, yes, but still not one of us. We have reminded you that all of Rostran will suffer Baalan's Curse if an Outworlder walks on our planet again."

"Baalan's Curse?" the Senator scoffed. "Just myth. You clerics are stuck in the past. A new age is upon us. We now have rights to trade and commerce. This new wormhole will bring us riches beyond our dreams. The ability to power our ships adequately to leave this system. Today is the beginning of a new age."

"We have lived in peace and isolation for more than a century," the Cleric warned. "Do not put our world at risk, Senator. Not for wealth or personal gain. The Church commands you."

"Commands me?" the Senator shouted. "I am the Queen's confidant. I am her most trusted. I will decide what dictates to follow. Certainly not orders from the Church. Go, before I send you and your disciples to the chambers."

The Cleric paled visibly at the threat, yet she stood her ground, her hands shaking. Too many people had gone to the chambers in the last century. The fair-haired at first, then those who carried other genetic traits that displeased the Czet'len.

The Clerics had worked to maintain the racial purity after the Czet'len left. They had now been living on Rostran for a century, and it had been half a century since they'd sent the Heathen to the annihilation chambers. Now the chambers were mostly used by the government to rid itself of criminals, although the Church still had the legal power to send someone there for their own reasons.

The old cleric raised her bony hand and pointed at the Senator. "I am an old woman, Senator. Yet I warn you. You are not beyond the reach of the Goddess. Displease her, and she will return to wreak her vengeance on you all." She turned with surprising grace and marched proudly from the room.

"Old fool," the Senator called behind her. As soon as the door closed, she resumed her study of the Kelsorian woman. She obviously had very good genes, and she was young. With the proper enhancement, she could become a brooder. Something humans were very good at. She could bear many children before she passed beyond childbearing age.

Even more exciting, she was a scientist. The Gwyndylyn needed such talents to strengthen the minds of the young ones in their order.

Her duty was clear. She had to convince the Outworlder to stay. The man she would get rid of.

One way or another.

## Chapter 10

*(Date: 1052-11-01, 09:10 ST)*

Durgin leaned back in the chair in his stateroom as he smiled at the holo of Alisa shimmering in the air in front of him. The image looked solid and lifelike, both in density and size, bringing with it the nearly perfect illusion that she was standing in front of him. It had been recorded down in the shuttle bay after they'd found a quiet moment in the middle of the day to make love, which explained why the image was a nude. She'd always looked so vibrant and happy right after lovemaking, her smile so warm, her eyes so bright, her hair an impossibly beautiful shade of blonde. A glow of impossible healthiness seemed to warm the very air around her, and the holo had captured that glow so perfectly.



He knew he shouldn't be torturing himself like this, but a flood of loneliness and loss had washed over him every day since Alisa left him. He closed his eyes and doused the hologram, trying to push the hollow feeling away.

He was interrupted by the door chime. A most welcome interruption given his sour mood. "Come in."

A burly young man with a handful of data disks entered his cabin. "Technician DeCamp reporting, Captain."

"So, what is it that's so damn urgent, DeCamp?"

DeCamp's heart was pounding painfully in his chest. "Captain, Sir, I, ah, I was studying the history and mythology of the Rostrans and I..."

"Was that your assignment? You are a technician, not a scholar."

DeCamp wilted. "No, I mean, not exactly. I was running a profile on Ensign Liddell, and one of the parameters came up to suggest..."

Durgin felt a sudden stab of misplaced jealousy. "A profile on the Ensign? Who authorized you to do that?"

"The personnel records are accessible by Culture for running what-ifs on suitable away teams for planetary contacts. I was working on a project for new contacts with Enlightenment worlds, and since she's blonde, I thought she might be a good candidate if we came across an Enlightenment planet and had to..."

"You are way out of line, Technician DeCamp," Durgin interrupted. "Get your section chief up here right away."

"Lieutenant Hegson is off the ship, Sir. So is my sub-chief of section."

"Then get me the officer in charge," Durgin growled.

"I, ah, I'm in charge actually, Sir."

Durgin rolled his eyes, wondering how in the hell this Technician had connected Alisa to the Enlightenment. Even more that he was in charge of an entire section on his ship. "So spit it out, DeCamp. What danger?"

"Well, I, ah, I ran this profile matching the ensign's physical parameters, not the visible ones but the med scans, to, ah, to any known race." He paused to take a deep breath. "I know this sounds crazy, but the Tank came back with the distinct probability that she's got a lot of Supremis blood." He swallowed hard and stood up tall to blurt it all out. "In fact, Sir, I think she's a Velorian."

Durgin couldn't help but laugh. Part of it was an act, and part the spirit of the moment. The Admiral had insisted he keep Alisa's origin a secret. But now this bottom-grade technician had figured it out on his own. Confirming that, however, would only encourage DeCamp's recklessness, so he continued challenging the Tech. "A Velorian? On my ship? That's the dumbest thing I ever heard, DeCamp. Hell, if she was, she'd drive us all crazy with those super-pheromones or whatever they exude. And we aren't all crazy, now are we?" He accented the word 'all'.

"No, Sir. It's just a hypothesis. Perhaps I'm wrong, but just in case, I was running a mythology check on Rostran. The Tank dug through all the data we've uploaded so far, and, well, I don't think the Rostrans are what they claim to be either, Sir."

"Damn it, what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Their history and mythology - alleged mythology - don't match."

"Do they ever, on any world? What's the point?"

"They aren't human. Most of them aren't anyway."

Durgin sneered. "Have you seen the pictures they beamed up? If they were any more human looking, the Doc would have to hand out hormone suppression pills."

"That's what got me thinking, Sir. Humans don't have the genes to develop those figures. Or keep things, you know, in place without some serious supporting clothing. And the Rostrans don't appear to have any of that. In fact, they don't wear much at all."

"Tell me something every man on this ship doesn't know." Durgin shrugged as he tried to be more conciliatory. "Doc figured they were into some serious gen-tech on a planetary scale. Human DNA is very flexible. Hell, surgeons used to pump silicone gel into women's bodies to get that look a century ago."

"The Tank checked and cross-checked all that, Sir. What it found was clear links between their actual history and that of the Supremis. Very cleverly disguised by a terminology that may be intentionally misleading, like their mythology. But a 94% correlation. To be specific, I think most of them are Arions, Sir."

Durgin stared dumfounded at him. "What the hell? Arions? Here? And a Velorian on my ship? Are you insane? That could start a war."

DeCamp looked his captain right in the eye. "No sir. I mean, I'm sane. I think. And the war... well, that's why I'm here." He cringed as he listened to his own words. He gamely continued. "The Rostrans are mostly Betans, although there are numerous accounts of activities on Rostran that suggest Primes as well. The government itself is a matriarchy with a single ruling clan, or *salon* as they call it. Gwyndlyn *salon*. I think it's made up mostly of Primes. Other than the Betan types and some Terrans who serve in administrative roles, that is."

Durgin sat down hard in his chair. "A matriarchy of female Primes, ruling an entire planet? **Shit.**"

"That's exactly right, Captain. And if my theory about Ensign Liddell is correct, and they figure out who she really is as well..." His voiced trailed off.

"Don't worry about her. If you were correct, she could lay waste to the whole goddamn planet with her bare hands. Nobody can stop a Velorian."

"The Rostrans apparently can, Sir. The Enlightenment records that we have in the Tank indicate that a Protector disappeared here fifty years ago. Even more worrisome, there are references everywhere in the Rostran databases to some kind of goddess. Also to someone they call a Heathen who was killed by the goddess." He caught Durgin's eye with his own.

"Let me guess. Fifty years ago."

"Exactly, Sir."

Durgin turned to look out his viewscreen at the blue planet below. "As if a bunch of Primes wasn't bad enough," he murmured, "they assassinate Velorians." He turned back to face DeCamp. "So who or what is this so-called goddess?"

"No idea, Sir. But as near as I can deduce, their religion is based on some kind of renewal or remaking of their queen by this goddess. And she can kill Protectors."

"The Ensign is hardly a Protector. And she's gone down to the planet wearing a wig."

"Something they'll see through quickly enough. And if she's an ordinary Velorian, then we have even more reason to fear for her safety."

"I didn't say she was."

"Agreed," DeCamp said with a little smile, "you didn't." In so many words, he said to himself. "We're just working on hypotheticals here, Sir."

"And since we are, you know that I would have to uphold the Kelsorian Directive to honor local laws and customs. If their laws declared Velorians to be criminals, I couldn't help the Ensign, if she was one. Is that your definition of our problem, DeCamp?"

"Yes, Sir. That's more or less the whole story."

Durgin cursed foully. "Like hell it is. If you are right, then the god-damned highlight of our first contact may be a battle involving the freaking ruling clan



of this squatching planet. How about you telling me how you idiots in Culture didn't figure this god-damned catastrophe out before the Ensign went planetside?"

"She's already down there?" DeCamp exclaimed.

"Her shuttle should be landing right now."

DeCamp turned white. "Call it back, Sir. Now. Quickly. While there's still time."

Durgin hesitated for a long moment, and then looked up at the red computer imager on the wall. "Computer access. Shuttle profiles. Time of landing of current mission."

"ETA five minutes ago," the computer responded in the completely lifelike voice of a young woman.

DeCamp reached out to grab Durgin's sleeve. "Contact her, Sir. The Ensign. If she is what we think, she can still return under her own power."

Durgin acted without thinking, and in so doing, erased the last doubts DeCamp had. "Computer, do we have contact with the shuttle?"

"Negative. Magnetic storm from solar flares has cut off all contact with the surface. Insufficient data to estimate next contact opportunity."

"Oh, God," DeCamp whispered as he listened to the computer voice. "We're too late." He looked up at the Captain with an anguished expression. "That half hour. If only I hadn't wasted that half hour."

## Chapter 11

*(Date: 1052-11-01, 09:20 ST)*

Alisa ducked through the shuttle's hatch and stepped out onto the warm pavement of the landing pad. The temperature on the surface of Rostran was a very warm 34C, but it was made more comfortable by a brisk breeze that blew from the north. She held Kalik's hand tightly, steadying him. He was having trouble walking in the heavier gravity.

A remarkably buxom woman in her late twenties stood before them. She wore a blue leather outfit, unzipped to reveal a remarkable chest, the outfit ending in an extremely short skirt. Her skin was tanned and flawless, her body fantastically fit, her eyes a gold-flecked blue and sparkling. Her hair was jet-black and straight.



"I am Excelsia, Crown Princess Andrea's youngest daughter. On behalf of the Royal Family, I welcome you to Rostran Mutiara. The Pearl of the Cluster." She bowed slightly, and then reached out to shake hands with Alisa. That was followed by her crossing her arms and briefly placing her hands over her breasts. Kalik recognized the Rostran gesture for "*I take you to my heart*". It was strangely suggestive, almost erotic.

Alisa mimicked the gesture as best she could with her robe closed, causing Excelsia to smile at her attempt at honoring their custom.

"We are both honored," Kalik said, realizing he was being ignored. "We of Kelsor have never had the privilege of attending a conjugal ceremony on your world." He tried to imitate the gesture of greeting, only to hear Excelsia laugh.

"That gesture is only for females, Lieutenant. Men have a very different way of showing respect."

"Would you show me?" he asked naively.

"Of course." She turned to stand very close to him, and reached down to take his hands in hers. Before he could object, she slipped them under the leather of her top, burying them in the soft warmth of her breasts.

Kalik's eyes opened wide as he tried to pull his hands back, but she showed unusual strength in holding them there. "You show respect by proving that your strength is less than mine."

Kalik stared down at his hands in shock.

"A man's strength against a woman's softness," she said, taking a deep breath to fill his hands further.

Kalik jerked his hands away, staggering backward to stare up at Excelsia in undisguised contempt.

She frowned as she rearranged her top to cover herself. "Our customs are unique, Lieutenant, but also very important to us. I trust you'll practice this gesture further with your crewmate before you come to the Conjugational."

She dismissed him with a toss of her head as she walked over to slip her arm through Alisa's. "My brother is to be married tomorrow, and our family's conjugal rites are the most elaborate on our planet. Especially since he marries a Gwyndylyn. I hope we do not shock you, but we receive very few visitors here, unfortunately none of whom are human, and our traditions have become somewhat different from other worlds, I fear."

"We will enjoy sharing the richness of your culture," Alisa said diplomatically. She was listening to Kalik's racing heartbeat, and she heard it miss a few beats before it began drop back to normal. Visitors who weren't human? Nearly all sentient life was human, especially following the seeding from Earth that had occurred millennia ago, reaching nearly every habitable world.

Excelsia led the way down two long lines of teenage girls. They were nearly as skimpily dressed as Excelsia, their long hair universally jet-black. They spread flowers at the women's feet. Kalik trailed behind, trying not to stare at the girl's abbreviated outfits and lithe physiques. He'd never seen such genetic perfection. They were flawless, with figures that usually required gen-tech and uncounted hours in a gym to create, but they were too young for that to make sense. He struggled to pull his attention back to Excelsia and Alisa. "Our mission is to explore new phenomena," he said stiffly, talking to Excelsia's back, "and that includes such unique cultures as yours. We are a science vessel."

"Phenomena?" Excelsia replied coldly without looking at him. "Unique cultures? I hope you don't talk like a scientist with your big words these next few days." She winked at Alisa. "We're here to celebrate the sacred joining of my brother and a Gwyndylyn princess. I'm afraid we lock our own scholars up during such celebrations. Don't force me to include you."

Alisa's eyebrow lifted, and Excelsia winked at her, hugging Alisa tightly to her side as she let her in on her private joke. "But don't let me prattle on. I'm just happy for my brother. And so happy to meet Outworlders. I know nothing of science or the universe beyond."

Kalik fell further behind the two of them, watching as the young greeters looked curiously at Alisa until she came close and then smiled shyly down at

her feet as she passed them. Charmingly innocent, he thought. On the other hand, he might as well be invisible. He had to come to a quick stop to keep from getting run down by two girls who ran from the greeting line as soon as Alisa and Excelsia had passed them.

Alisa in turn concentrated on listening to the crowd, extending the range of her hearing as far as she could. A Terran, she heard several of them remark, wondering what they were doing on Rostran. She sensed only innocent curiosity until she heard someone spit out the word *Czet'len*. Then 'filthy outworlders'. The words were spoken like a curse. Then something else she couldn't make out about heathens and blasphemy.

Kalik caught up to join her in Excelsia's flitter. It rose with a hum to fly into the city, finally descending dizzily to deposit them in a broad atrium at the center of what Excelsia described as the queen's dwelling. Palace was more like it, Kalik thought. The building was two city blocks square and soared many hundreds of stories upward. Yet most of the interior was open space. Gardens and pools were surrounded by crystal towers and soaring ramparts. Everything was made of white marble with polished silver metal trim that was as shiny as Alisa's robe. Kalik was awed by it. Even Alisa was impressed, although she remembered the Hall of Protectors on Velor, and therefore knew something of grandiose architecture. She quickly pushed that thought from her mind. Too much pain lay even now in the remembrance.

They were finally ushered into a huge, ornate room. There was an oval bed big enough for half a dozen sleepers, and the middle of the room was occupied by a ten-meter wide pool of bubbling water. Red and yellow silks billowed in the warm breezes which blew through wide open windows, providing a token of privacy. The colors were soft, mostly orange and green pastels which glowed pleasantly in the unusual spectrum of the Rostran sun.

"We share the same room?" Kalik asked the young man who had opened the doors ahead of them. Startled by the question, the man glanced silently at the floor, bowed and backed out the doorway, closing it behind him.

"I could arrange other quarters if that would be more appropriate," Excelsia quickly offered. "This room isn't large, but given that you've been living inside the confines of a starship, I thought it would be adequate."

"No, this is fine," Alisa said firmly as she looked around a bedroom as large as a cargo bay. "Your customs are different from ours, but we would like to experience life as you live it during our brief stay."

Excelsia flashed an approving smile and then excused herself.

Once they were alone, Kalik set their bags by the bed and looked around. "This has to be the largest room I've ever seen. And it's only a bedroom."

"The most important room in a Rostran house," Alisa mused as she found the agenda of events on the desk. "Looks like we've got a few hours to freshen up before the evening activities start."

"Which are?" Kalik asked as he walked around the room in awe.

"Some kind of greeting of visitors by what they call the *bricha* and *nabricha*."

"Huh?"

"Bride and bridegroom, more or less."

"Sounds civilized enough," Kalik shrugged. He found a bathroom, but it contained only a small sink and stool. At least it afforded some privacy. The only bathing facility was the central washing pool, something he recalled was called a *sophrat*. "I gather they think we're married or something."

Alisa shook her head. "Durgin made it clear we weren't attached. But from what I can understand, sleeping alone is regarded as socially aberrant behavior. Rostrans don't get married in any conventional sense anyway, and sexual fidelity doesn't seem to be part of their culture. The Conjugation is merely a public declaration of the couple's desire to have children."

"So what do they do then? Sleep with anyone they want?"

"Apparently," Alisa mused. "They honor each other with sexual gestures and offers of intimacy." She patted the bed. "But I think this bed is big enough so that we can each have our own side. We don't have to follow all of the local customs."

"Right," Kalik mumbled, suddenly unsure whether that was a good thing or not.

She glanced toward the *sophrat*. "I'm going to freshen up."

Kalik followed her gaze. "I can wait outside while you..."

Alisa paused to look at him, one hand on her hip. "Kalik, there is an old Earth saying that starts with '*When in Rome, do as the Romans do*'. I don't have anything to hide from you, so you don't need to be coy with me. We do like each other, don't we?"

Kalik lost his poise entirely. "I do. Like you I mean. Just not... in that way."

"Well *that way* is the Rostran way. Guess we'll have to fake it then."

Kalik looked at her strangely and then laughed. "I still can't believe this entire culture is obsessed with sexual vitality."

"Some say that about the Supremis. That their entire culture is based on it."

"Well, this isn't Velor, not with all that black hair. And the Arions are all gung-ho warriors, killing for honor and all that nonsense. I'm not sure they know the difference between sex and mayhem."

Alisa smiled faintly as she pulled her dark wig off and tossed it on the bed. "I'm not going to argue that point." She brushed her fingers through her hair and shook her head. The golden strands fell long and straight down her back, looking as fresh as if she'd just showered and brushed it out. "Imagine what the Rostrans would think if they saw me like this. I'm quite sure I'm the only blonde on the planet at this moment."

"But why? Other than some obvious gen-tech tweaks, and an obsessive focus on fitness, why would they narrow their gene pool so much? It sounds like something an Arion would do."

Alisa's eyebrow lifted. "Did you sense anything unusual about Excelsia too?"

"You mean, other than the obvious." He cupped his hands a foot in front of his chest.

Alisa giggled.

"Well, she was unusually strong. And I didn't think a woman's breasts could be that big and that firm while still being..." He stopped as Alisa looked at him strangely. He blushed as he realized he was describing the sensation of fondling another woman.

Alisa smirked. "Spoken by a man with experience?"

Kalik blushed even brighter. His status as the least sexually experienced man on the *Flame* was not a mark of distinction in most people's eyes. But he wasn't used to Alisa teasing him about it. "I mean, hell, she didn't even jiggle when she walked," he answered obliquely.

"I noticed. Another mystery to solve. But for now, I'm going to enjoy this hot water." She turned her back and unclasped her silver robe to let it slip to the floor. She didn't need a Velorian's ears to hear the gasp from behind her.

Kalik took a few deep breaths before daring to speak. "Holy Saints, I had no idea you worked out that much, Alisa."

She smiled at his innocent modesty, keeping her back to him as she pulled down the straps of her dress to let the filmy fabric fall to her ankles. "I don't. I was lucky to be born with good genes."

Kalik stared, deciding that was the biggest understatement he'd ever heard. He saw absolute perfection. Starting from her bare shoulders and running down to her tightly rounded behind, her body was both slender and fantastically fit. She wore only a gold chain and her heels now. "Alisa!" he gasped.

"What?" she said over her shoulder, feeling his eyes on her back.

"You can't undress like that... not here!"

She sighed. "I'm going to have to take these off at the ceremony. You already knew that."

"But I figured... you know, until then..."

"Why do you keep acting as if I'm some old hag?" she asked as she bent down to take her heels off and toss them on the bed as well. "I can't be that repulsive."

"No, no, it's not that. It's just that, you know, you're extremely beautiful." He paused. "Far, far too beautiful."

Alisa smiled as she boldly turned to face him, her hands on her hips. Kalik averted his eyes and turned his back to her, insisting on the modesty that she'd given up on. "I didn't realize there was an upper limit."

"I've just never seen... you know, anyone... as beautiful as you."

Alisa stood at the edge of the pool, worried that her worst fears about Kalik were being realized. He was going to withdraw into himself. She sighed in frustration as she walked down the steps into the bubbling water. "It's O.K to turn around now, Kalik. You won't turn to stone."

He turned back to see that only her head was visible above the water. Her hair was floating on the bubbles like a golden cloud.

"We may be on Rostran, Kalik, but I'm still the girl you've been working beside for the last thousand hours. A girl who needs someone to give her a really good back scrub."

## Chapter 12

(Date: 1052-11-01, 09:25 ST)

"Prep another shuttle," Durgin bellowed as he strolled back onto the bridge of *Anders Flame*. DeCamp trailed behind him, daunted by the prospect of actually standing in front of the huge viewscreen. The bridge was normally off limits to science technicians; Durgin was a stickler for that sort of thing.

Lieutenant Walark, the Duty Officer, scanned his readouts. "That was our last shuttle, Captain. The other two are on the moon. Anyway, the solar weather is building up - we're already seeing some Category 4 flares. I ordered the shuttles to move to the dark side, per your standing orders."

"When is our first contingent due back?"

"About eight hours, assuming the storm abates. I have no idea how long the flare sequence lasts on this sun. Kalik and Liddell might know, but..."

"Eight hours is already too long, Lieutenant," Durgin barked. "We have to act now. Where's the shuttle that landed on Rostran?"

"The pilot reported arriving at the capital spaceport, but hasn't checked back in. The flares are creating an immense ion storm around the planet's unusually strong magnetic field. Our transmissions to and from the surface are becoming distorted."

"Punch through it, Lieutenant. If we can talk halfway across the galaxy, we can certainly transmit through a thousand miles of ion storm."

"Yes, Sir. Comm is trying. But at the moment, we don't have contact with either the Rostrans or our own people."

Durgin turned toward the older man who was seated in front of an array of screens. "I need data on the duration of these solar flare excursions, Dan."

Commander Daniel Pestrov, Chief Science Officer, bent over his instruments, leaving DeCamp free to access the closest Tank terminal. DeCamp hoped the neural nets had absorbed enough Rostran Net traffic by now to form an answer. He keyed in a query, and numbers instantly flickered across his screen. "Mean of 2.3 planetary days, Sir. Standard deviation of 0.6."

"You mean to tell me we can't talk to anyone on this goddamn planet for two days?" Durgin shouted in exasperation. "How did that little fact get left out of this morning's mission briefing?"

"Physics was probably too busy analyzing the wormhole data," DeCamp ventured. "Moreover, it might not have occurred to them to look for something like that in the Net traffic database. That's mostly Security or Science's bailiwick."

Durgin settled into his chair. First unexplained matter/anti-matter bursts, and now an ion storm. The mission was starting to go to shit. He thought of Alisa again. He'd merely hoped to embarrass her by sending her down to the Rostran ceremony, assuming it was going to force her to expose herself to Kalik for who she really was. If the crew found out about her race from Kalik, it wouldn't be an official breach of security.

More importantly, once she was outed, he could put her to use in ways only a Velorian could serve. She could extend the reach of the ship's sensors and probes immensely. *Anders Flame* would make a name for itself this voyage. So would he. And just as importantly, it would send a message to the Admiral. Planting an alien on his vessel without telling him was a breach of protocol that demanded redressing the only way he could. By taking advantage of her abilities in ways the Admiral had never dreamed of.

Durgin blinked his private thoughts away as Pestrov confirmed DeCamp's report. "Two days is unacceptable, Dan," he growled at his old friend. "Cut through the storm by using the main sensor I want that shuttle with our two officers back in the dock, even if I have to do a suit drop onto the planet to get them myself."

Pestrov paled. "That's a big risk, Captain. Could burn out the transducer."

"We need to get Liddell back, Dan."

Petrov looked at his old friend, wondering why the Captain didn't mention her superior, Lieutenant Kalik. Even stranger was Durgin's threat to do a suit drop. That kind of re-entry was far more dangerous than using a shuttle during a solar flare. It was a very rough ride in the best of conditions. Ten G's and enough buffeting to knock your teeth loose. Lots of hard radiation. The cooling units wouldn't keep all the heat out either, not while entering a planetary atmosphere as deep as Rostran. Drop suits were used only in the desperation of close-in battle or as escape pods from a fatally damaged ship. He bent back over his instruments.

DeCamp was the only person on the bridge who was smiling. He was convinced that he'd cracked the secret. Why else would Liddell be in more danger than the Lieutenant? A Velorian, on his ship. It was literally a dream come true.

"I'll notify the Dropmaster," the Duty Officer said as he followed up on Durgin's comment on a suit drop.

Durgin slumped back in his chair, lost in thought. Perhaps if Alisa was forced to become open about who and what she was with the rest of the crew, then she'd be willing to discuss continuing their relationship. The holo image from his cabin appeared again on the backs of his eyelids. They'd been so happy together for a while. The only frustration had been hiding the joy he'd felt in



her arms from the rest of the crew. It hadn't been appropriate for the Captain to be sleeping with the most junior officer in his crew.

He let his thoughts wander further during the few remaining moments it took Comm to realign the antenna. He'd known many women over the last five decades, not to mention being married three times. But he'd never encountered anyone as erotically skillful as Alisa. Or remotely as physically fit. Spacemen talked endlessly of the beautiful and willing ladies of Eros, a planet whose only product was love. But the most skillful lady of Eros was but a rank amateur compare to Alisa.

Astoundingly, Alisa had claimed to have limited experience with men before him, yet her every instinct was that of a woman who'd been trained in the ways of love. Every gesture, every thought and every touch was crafted as if by Aphrodite herself. She instinctively knew a thousand ways to please him. She never got sore, never had a mood, never got tired. She never had a moment when her libido was less than stunning. And then there were her pheromones. One whiff, and his body surged with the kind of sexual electricity and vitality he'd felt back in his twenties. They would embrace each other with an athleticism that bordered on violence, her body inspiring his in the act of loving until he was too exhausted to stay awake.

Then it ended as abruptly as it had started. She'd left him to go back to her solitary ways, apparently having slept with no man since leaving him. She didn't seem to mind the loss. A most unusual behavior for a Velorian, especially in the randy atmosphere of a Kelsorian survey ship.

But then, Alisa was anything but a typical Vel. Which was why sending her down to the royal conjugal rites was going to be such a challenge for her. She would have no choice but to reveal herself for what she was, most likely right in front of her shy and inexperienced colleague. Durgin grinned fiercely at that thought. What perfect opposites they were. An inhibited male virgin, insecure and devoid of confidence and with little worldly experience, and a young superwoman whose every gene had been engineered to make love.

Strangely, despite being such opposites, the two of them had become strong friends. Durgin didn't pretend to understand how anyone could have a platonic relationship with a Velorian. It was physically impossible, at least by anything he knew. He wondered if he should have the Doc check Kalik out. Perhaps his plumbing wasn't hooked up right or something.

Pestrov interrupted his private musings. "We've got contact with the shuttle pilot, Captain. The Rostrans have forbidden his lifting off, claiming the ion storm is too dangerous. The upper atmospheric field is several thousand Gauss with potential electrical conduction around a metal object like the shuttle in the millions of volts. That's outside safety guidelines."

"Any sign that our officers are in any trouble?"

"No, Sir. But the pilot says Liddell and Kalik are in the city now, and they don't answer their comms." He paused. "And, ah, given the dress style on Rostran, they might not have a way to carry their communicators with them."

"Even wristcoms? Never mind. Send the pilot into the city to find them. And put me in touch with the local authorities. That Senator I talked with earlier. What was her name?"

"Kaltquest."

"Right. She'll know what's going on."

## Chapter 13

*(Date: 1052-11-01, 09:55 ST)*

Cleric Sundanjan stood beside the young monyk as she ran the visitors' vital signs through the MedAnalysis net. Concealed sensors had made hundreds of measurements as the visitors entered the palace.

"The male is distinctly human normal," the monyk said. "Fits the profile for a Kelsorian human, although his behavior toward the female is strangely hesitant."

"Ignore him. It's the woman I'm interested in."

"Her readings are unusual, but I've never seen Outworlders before," the monyk said worriedly.

"There have been a few others," the Cleric said sourly, "but they have at least taken the time to learn our customs. These two show a lack of knowledge. You saw how the man was confused by Excelsia's gesture of respect."

"It's even stranger than that, your eminence. The woman doesn't respond physically like the others. Even when they walked up that long flight of stairs at the palace, her heart rate stayed at exactly 40 beats per minute."

"She appears to be extremely fit."

"Little change in respiration either. Her heart has a funny beat too. An extra half beat each time."

The Cleric took a sharp breath. "An extra beat? And no signs of exertion?"

The monyk turned to look at her superior, both their faces turning pale as they realized the significance of the monyk's words. "Like a Gwyndylyn?"

The silence in the room was suddenly deafening. Only the Cleric dared speak. "No, she is not of this world -- certainly not a member of the ruling *salon*." She paused before speaking the words she'd dreaded saying all her life. "Perhaps one of the Heathen has returned!"

"A Heathen?" the monyk gasped. "But... but she looks nothing like our pictures of them. And she was invited here by the Gwyndylyn." The monyk looked really scared now, but she was still thinking.

"If she is a Heathen, we have to deal with her swiftly, lest she report back that we are weak." The Cleric wrung her hands. "Most of all, we must show the Goddess that we have not forgotten the lessons of the Czet'len. That the Church's faith remains strong."

Another monyk walked into the room to interrupt them. "I've got a communication request from the Kelsorian ship, Your Eminence. They're asking for Senator Kaltquest."

"The human snakes speak with the Gwyndylyn, yet they do not see their own for what she is," Cleric Sundanjan hissed. She turned and walked as quickly as her frail legs could carry her toward the communication console. "Route it to me. Cancel the query to the Senator."

A grainy, flickering image of two officers sitting in command chairs appeared on the viewer a few moments later. The Cleric was startled to see men instead of women at the helm. She recovered quickly enough, and replied to the hail. "Greetings, Kelsorians. To whom am I speaking?"

"I'm Captain Peter Durgin of the Kelsorian survey ship *Anders Flame*. This is my Chief Science Officer. With whom do I have the honor of speaking?"

"I am Cleric Sundanjan. Head of Religious Studies of the Church of Rostran."

"I had hoped to talk with Senator Kaltquest. She has been our sponsor in establishing cultural contacts between our peoples."

"The Senator is busy with her duties. The Conjugal rites begin tonight, and that is the most important matter in the kingdom at the moment."

Arrogant bitch, Durgin thought as he glanced warily at Pestrov. Unlike the Senator, the Cleric didn't communicate an ounce of warmth. "We have lost contact with our two officers who are attending the rites, Cleric. The solar storm is interfering. Can you help us to restore contact?"

The Cleric glanced at someone outside the view of the camera. She turned back to smile thinly at Durgin. "I'm sorry, Captain, but no communication is allowed with members of the conjugal ceremony until it completes. That will be approximately three days from now."

"Is there any problem down there that we can help with?"

"What kind of problem do you anticipate?"

"We have only now come to realize how unique the culture of your world is, and how Outworlders who do not understand your customs are regarded."

The Cleric suppressed a small smile. The Kelsorians were not as advanced in their science and research as they claimed. Their violation of cultural sensitivities was due to ignorance, not arrogance. They would want to correct their mistake, but she wanted to keep them on the defensive. "It is true that we do not normally encourage visitors. But our laws do not prohibit *Freyen* from setting foot on Rostran, as long as they follow our laws."

"*Freyen*?"

"A local term, Captain. The Czet'lan taught us that there are two peoples, *Freyen* and *Alak*. The Free and the Enslaved. We welcome all those who live free. We do not welcome members of either the Empire or the Enlightenment."

Durgin suspected he might tip his hand with his next question, but he had to make sure DeCamp was on the right track. He wished fervently that his usual Culture officers were back on board. "Very appropriate measures, Cleric. What would your laws demand of you if what you call an *Alak* were to visit your world?"

The Cleric smiled crookedly, her expression much like a crocodile sizing up its prey. So, the visitor really was a Heathen, and the Kelsorian Captain knew it. The Gwyndlyn were so blinded by greedy unbelievers like Senator Kaltquest and their arrogance and power that they'd opened the door to destruction. She tried to keep her face impassive as she replied. "Death, Captain. In our annihilation chamber. A simple remedy to ensure our freedom. Surely you would do the same."

"A sensible response when faced with the violence of the Empire, Cleric. Kelsor is also a non-aligned world." Durgin specifically left out any reference to the Enlightenment. Even more, he had no idea how they'd kill a Velorian like Alisa, but he had to assume it was possible. DeCamp's talk of some kind of Goddess was bothering him. A Kryp'terran perhaps? They were allegedly more capable than even a Virago.

"That is why you are welcome here, Captain. Your ship would no longer exist if you'd been messengers from the *Alak*."

"Will you at least ensure that our two officers are well? It would be most reassuring to our crew to know that they are enjoying their visit."

"Your crewmembers will be invited to participate in our ceremonies. They will receive careful consideration by all members of the party. Have no fear, Captain, we will treat them with the honor that any Kelsorian deserves."

"Thank you, Cleric. I could ask for no more. *Anders Flame* out."

Durgin clicked off the viewer. "Damn it. They're up to something. I can feel it."

"They claim to have no quarrel with non-aligned worlds," Pestrov shrugged. "Liddell and Kalik are adaptable and quick on their feet. I see no issue here."

Durgin opened his mouth to explain, and then closed it. The Admiral's orders were explicit. He wasn't going to reveal her background. His responsibility was to get word to Alisa to keep her true nature under wraps, or get her back before the Rostrans figured out what she was.

"Prepare for a Singleton drop. I need a heavily armed security team to go with me. You have the conn, Commander." Durgin turned and headed for the bridge lift.

"Captain," Pestrov protested as he looked up from his instruments, "I've just reviewed the latest flare sequence. The solar radiation is well past tolerable limits for a drop suit."

"I have to, Commander. I sent her, I mean them, down into a trap."

"Adding your name to the casualty list isn't going to help, Captain."

Durgin cursed as he turned and walked back to sit wearily in his command chair. "Damn it. How long?"

"At least twelve to eighteen hours for the primary flare to pass. Maybe a lot more if we get more prominences." Pestrov walked over to stand beside Durgin.

"Our people on the ground may not be alive then, Dan," Durgin said privately to his old friend. He and Dan Pestrov had served together on three ships.

"I don't understand, Peter. The Rostrans have no reason to hurt them."

"You just have to trust me, Dan. I can't tell you the reason, but you have to find a way to get me down there as fast as possible."

## Chapter 14

*(Date: 1052-11-01, 10:30 ST)*

"In there?" Kalik asked in disbelief as he stared at the bubbling water. They were standing beside the sophrat that was located at the center of their shared room in the Rostran palace.

Alisa shrugged as she swished around in the water. "It's the only place to wash up in this room. I don't bite."

Kalik looked around nervously, hoping for a deliverance that wasn't going to come. He finally turned his back and began peeling off his tight pants. He was very much a man now, which made getting undressed that much harder. When he finally got his pants off, he took a deep breath and then turned around, trying to mask his arousal with his hands, which proved too small for the task. Alisa looked up at him from the bubbling water, and then covered her mouth and giggled, which sent a further wave of blushing embarrassment racing through him.

"It seems you know more about Rostran customs than you let on, Kalik. That is precisely how you approach a lady whom you wish to honor on this world."

"Honor?" he asked doubtfully. His thoughts raced back to the things he'd seen on their Net.

Alisa shifted into the authoritative voice she used in seminars. "Bringing women pleasure is the basis of this matriarchic society. They have levels upon levels of protocol, but in the end, offering to pleasure a lady is the ultimate way to show respect."

Kalik gasped in pain as he slid too quickly into the hot water, but that did nothing to diminish his ardor. "A strange way to show respect."

"Actually, it's a very nice way. And I'm glad to see you're getting into the spirit of it all," she giggled.

"Well, I'm glad you're so damn pleased by my delicate condition," Kalik said, a hint of frustrated anger in his voice. "But I can't help it. And I already respect you just fine."

"You're not supposed to be able to help it, silly. That's why the Rostrans make these gowns so small. And their bodies so... endowed."

"It wasn't the gown," he mumbled as he leaned against the side of the tub. "Or the Rostrans."

Alisa said nothing for a long second, and then, "Oh, then you don't think I'm ugly after all?"

"Ugly?" Kalik said in astonishment. "Try the most astoundingly beautiful woman I've ever seen. More stunning than anyone I could ever have imagined."

"Well, you don't have to go over the top," Alisa giggled. "We've worked side by side for months."

"Over the top?" he mumbled as he looked up into the incredible blue eyes that had secretly haunted his dreams. "I don't even begin to know where the top is." He quickly looked away. "I'm such an idiot."

Alisa moved closer, her fingers interlacing with his. "Kalik, you are very important to me. You are my closest friend in the whole universe. Whatever happens in these next couple of days..." She paused as she searched for the right words. "I mean, some things are going to happen to me, Kalik. Maybe to both of us. Things you might find shocking at first. Just remember that none of that means I don't like you... or enjoy your company. And you have to understand that I'll be O.K. no matter what happens."

"You're going to be selected, aren't you?"

Alisa nodded slowly. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure of it."

"And what about me?" he asked glumly.

Alisa spoke with a Velorian's directness. "I don't know about that. I mean, based on the way these guys wear their pants, these gen-teched ladies might be out of your league."

Kalik stared at her for a long moment, only to see her lips tilt ever so slightly. She winked at him.

"Yeah... O.K, I got it. Just the place for a sophisticated Reigelan like you to party, huh? But not some guy from inhibited Kelsor?"

"Hmm... if you mean, am I likely to enjoy being honored in the Rostran way by these gen-teched men, then yes, I think that's a good hypothesis, Lieutenant. I'll have to do the lab work tomorrow to define the key input variables. We can then run some designed experiments to see if there are elements of congruency between Rostran and Reigellan sexual..."

"Stop, stop," Kalik suddenly laughed. Alisa sounded like she was still back in the Tank, testing some scientific theory. "I get the drift. Arthur's Ghost, you can take the scientist out of the lab, but not the lab out of the scientist."

Alisa turned as she slid closer to him, turning her back to him as the two of them floated weightlessly in the middle of fragrantly oiled water. "Then would you please stop being so analytical and worried and just scrub my back."

He reached out, hesitating an inch from her back. She pulled her hair to the side as he took a deep breath.

His initial touch against her back was gentle, hesitant, almost reverent.

"I'm a lot harder to break than you might imagine, Kalik."

He daringly pressed his palm to her back, then slowly traced his fingers down the slippery softness of her skin. Her back muscles were incredibly tight beneath the softest, tightest skin he'd ever felt. He stared at her golden back, his body tingling, lost in his intimate exploration. He followed one firm curve of muscle to her side, then upward, only to jerk his hand back when he accidentally brushed the luxuriously soft curve of her breast.

Alisa smiled at his touch, and licked her lips, tasting his hormones in the air around her. Musky and very masculine. She caught the first trace of honey and wildflowers. She heard Kalik inhale deeply of her scent, and his heart started to pound even faster.

"Are you O.K, Kalik?"

She heard him take a deep breath. "God, you are so incredibly fit."

"Compared to whom? Your last girlfriend?"

"No, I mean, other women. Kelsie and Sylvan working out in the gym. They're fit, but not so... perfect."

Alisa closed her eyes as she gave herself up to the simple enjoyment of his massage. She'd never let Durgin touch her like this, for it had somehow seemed too intimate to let him sense her true strength. Durgin had understood her legacy, her genetics, her power. Kalik knew nothing of that. Yet his wildly beating heart told her that he was very aroused. He was enjoying touching her, thinking of her as an ordinary woman, not as anything more.

It took all her willpower to not turn around and kiss him. Her nakedness and the soft desire in her eyes would tell Kalik everything he needed to know about her feelings. Yet she bit her lip and held herself back, knowing that she had to let him make the first move. He was eventually going to learn that she was Velorian and she didn't want him to think she'd compelled him. That she'd used her pheromones on him.

Kalik's heart was nearly leaping out of his chest. He longed to speak, he longed to act as he had dreamed so many times, but his body seemed to be paralyzed.

Alisa spoke as if in his dreams. "You do know about pleasing someone? The way you have been, but more... intensely." She took a deep breath and said daringly, "This tub was made for such things."

Kalik swallowed hard and forced himself to take a shuddering breath. "You mean... the, ah, the water in this tub is mixed with lubricants..."

She nodded solemnly as she turned her head around far enough to see his face. He looked so serious that she had to struggle not to laugh. Her pheromones clearly hadn't reached the pleasure centers of his brain yet. Either that or his fear was suppressing them.

She tried one more time, trying to phrase things in a way that wouldn't intimidate him. "Andre, we still have more than an hour before we have to dress for dinner. We've got time to test a hypothesis or two about coefficients of friction and how they relate to pleasure. Just as a matter of scientific inquiry of course."

Kalik took a deep breath, and the building bubble of tension eased enough for him to laugh nervously. "God, you are such a total tease, Alisa."

"You're the one who's touching me." She paused to take a deep breath, saying daringly, "Turning me on."

Kalik's head was swimming. The air around him smelled wonderful, as if every breath was warming him and making him lighter, more daring. She snuggled back in his arms, knowing that whatever boundaries he'd drawn for himself, they were finally starting to crumble.

"What do you expect, I'm a..." she caught herself, realizing she was about to say *a Velorian*, and instead said, "... a woman on her way to a wedding."

## Chapter 15

(Date: 1052-11-01, 11:30 ST)

Alisa sat on a bench in the courtyard outside their room an hour later. Her wig was safely fastened back in place. Kalik was inside, trying to take his mind off the encounter in the pool by working on his communicator. He hadn't been able to contact the *Flame* since landing on the surface three hours earlier.

Alisa was just as frustrated as he was. Even in the grip of her pheromones, Kalik had frustratingly managed to remain what he called "a gentleman" throughout their shared bath. Just when she'd felt him starting to let go, he'd turned and climbed out of the tub to wrap himself in a huge towel. How his misplaced sense of propriety had overcome the command of her pheromones, she had no idea. It had to be an inexperienced man's sheer terror. After all, he wasn't one of those religious fanatics who believed that sex was evil.

How was she going to prepare him for the Conjugational if he kept acting this way? It was three days from now, and her further research had convinced her that it was not the place for an innocent man. Even if he could avoid getting chosen, he was going to see things that were outside his experience. He needed a few experiences of his own before he got there.



Just one more part of the strangeness of my life, she sighed. A Velorian who couldn't entice a man in a Jacuzzi to get passionate with her. Who couldn't even share her needs with him for fear of damaging their friendship.

She was considering the irony of that when the door chime rang. She glanced toward it, only to find that she couldn't see through either the wall or the door. Her tachyon vision was even weaker on Rostran than it had been on the ship.

Kalik answered the door. She heard him talking to a woman, and then the door closed. That was followed by the clicking sound of a woman walking across the marble floor in high heels. Alisa looked up as a very tall, slender woman emerged into the courtyard. She wore a dress made of a silvery brown fabric, almost metallic looking, with the mid-calf length skirt slit up the side almost to her hip. Her arms and shoulders were bare, yet remarkably muscular given her slender build. Her bust, while significant by human standards was below Rostran norms. Her eyes were bright blue, her hair black like everyone else, although longer, hanging more than waist length. A misplaced lock of blonde hair fell across her face. She was extremely attractive.



"My name is Marla," she said simply. She didn't offer her hand or the more intimate gesture of heart to heart sharing. "I've come to ask your permission to take your companion to the first night of the Conjugational."

"I had thought he and I would go together?"

"It is not our custom," Marla replied with a shake of her head. "Visitors must always be individually honored by a member of the *bricha* and *nabricha's* entourage."

Alisa nodded slowly, her thoughts racing. She'd hoped to be able to cushion the impact of Rostran customs on Kalik. But this way, perhaps there was a way to maintain her secret a little longer. She looked up at Marla, only to feel a strange tension growing in the air. She found herself instinctively disliking her, but had no reason why.

"Do you have a claim on this man?" Marla asked simply, sensing the same tension. "Does he belong to you?"

Alisa shook her head. "We just work together." It somehow seemed important to downplay their friendship, although she wasn't sure why.

"I suspected as much," Marla nodded. "Especially since he is an *inuedi*. Your man would not be such."

"I don't know that word."

"The best translation would be *innocent*. You may have other words for an inexperienced man."

"Ah. Yes, he is that indeed. Innocent and reluctant." Alisa smiled at Marla's insight. "And no, my man would not be an *inuedi*."

"Yet there is tension between you. I will solve that problem. I am a *promis*. Although my usual students are far younger than Lieutenant Kalik."

"A teacher? What do you teach?" Alisa asked, starting to suspect the answer.

"The things a man must know to live in our society. The loving skills."

Alisa laughed softly. "You are going to teach him to make love? To whom?"

Marla shrugged, not understanding what was funny. "To me first, of course. Then to other *promis*. He has much to learn before the final night of the Conjugational if he is going to honor our customs."

Alisa giggled to herself. While Kalik might be reluctant to change the nature of their relationship, he would have to comply with the local customs. Out of duty if not desire. "Tell me more about the Conjugational, Marla."

"I'm surprised you don't know. Our customs are not a secret."

"We are new to this sector of space."

Marla sighed as she brushed the blonde lock from her face. Her voice was low as she looked down at her feet. "It occurs over three nights. Tonight is called *Pala*. It is a time when the parties from distant locations get acquainted with each other."

"Acquainted?"

"It is simple enough. The groom will honor a woman of his choosing, as long as it isn't his *bricha*. It is customary to honor the most distant visitor first, so I suspect he might choose you tonight. You are certainly attractive enough."

Alisa nodded, taking her compliment in stride. "And Kalik?"

"Normally, the *bricha* would make the same choice of another distant visitor. But since she's in *dala'kar*, your companion would not survive her passion. That's why she sent me to take her place."

"*Dala'kar*?"

"A heightened level of passionate desire. A kind of passionate fever. A woman has little control of her body when she desires such loving. And given that she's a princess from the Gwyndylyn *salon*, enabled by the *dala'kar*, she will be at her fiercest these three days."

Alisa didn't like the sound of that. Some kind of hormonal frenzy? "What's a Gwyndylyn? A *Salon*?"

"A *salon* is like a sisterhood. A gathering of those who share a common genetic heritage. Gwyndylyn is one of dozens of *salons*, but it is the one with the highest status. I was once Gwyndylyn."

Now Alisa understood her arrogant attitude. "And the groom?"

"It is much the same. With a man, the fever is called *Daka*. The Prince is in the throes of it, but unlike your male, I sense that you are strong and have some experience with loving."

Now the things she'd seen on the Net started to make sense. The Rostrans apparently regarded loving skills and sexual experience the same way other cultures treated athletic or professional skills. She suppressed a smile at that thought. What an insane place for a Velorian to try to pretend to be human. "I will manage," she said simply.

Marla nodded. "You asked about the other nights. The second night is *Gal'an*. A night devoted to regeneration. Our *salon* will celebrate the birth of our culture, and the Goddess will appear among us. You may be invited, but not the male."

"His name is Andre. Not 'the male'."

"As you wish."

"Interesting social structure you have, Marla. Matriarchies are historically rare. And your mythology is unique."

Marla looked offended. "Mythology refers to myths. I am talking about our Goddess."

"Of course. I'm sorry," Alisa apologized. She decided to keep any further thoughts on that subject to herself. "And then the third night?"

"The Conjugational, of course. The bonding is not complete until all members of the ceremony have honored either the bride or groom."

"That is not what I'd read," Alisa replied, worried now, mostly for Kalik. "I thought it was very selective?"

"It is for ordinary ceremonies. But this is a royal Conjugational. The Prince and Princess must be honored by all, as their status demands."

"And you will be there all three nights?"

"Of course. On the last night as a *hala'lan*. What you might call, a hostess. The *promis* will ensure that everyone bestows their honors appropriately."

"So what is the Prince like?"

"Unusually strong for a man, and very handsome. A true leader of men. His name is Talak. I have always regarded it as an honor to be chosen by him."

"And the *bricha*?"

"Layla? She's a Gwyndlyn warrior."

"A warrior? I thought your world was universally peaceful."

"There are a few among us who maintain the order. Layla is the daughter of our Mother-Superior, and she will become the leader of all warriors after the Conjugational completes. Other than the Queen of course. She rules us all."

"Who's going to be a leader?" Kalik asked as he walked outside to join them.

"The Princess," Alisa offered.

Marla rose to her feet. In her heels, she stood a head taller than Kalik's 1.8 meters. "I was once a friend of the Princess before I chose to become a *promis*."

"What's a *promis*?" Kalik asked.

"Marla will tell you later," Alisa replied with a wink.

"Whatever," he shrugged, trying not to stare at Marla. He'd never seen a woman so tall, or with such a pronounced yet slender muscularity. "You don't mind my leaving you here all alone, Alisa?"

Alisa shook her head. "It's you I'm worried about." She gave Marla a meaningful glance. There was definitely something about her that she didn't trust, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Feminine jealousy perhaps? Something dangerous in the way her eyes glowered? All those muscles? Or was it just the likelihood that Marla was likely to succeed in seducing Kalik when she'd failed? Alisa blinked that last thought away. That wasn't fair. Kalik's hesitation in the sophrat was because they were friends. They both knew that friendships often failed after they turned to love affairs.

Marla looked at them both before turning to head for the front door. Kalik shrugged and flashed Alisa a quick smile before turning to follow her. "*When in Rome...*" he mumbled as he walked away.

## Chapter 16

(Date: 1052-11-01, 12:15 ST)

Marla stared straight ahead in silence as she flew her flitter across the crowded city. Her discussion with the Kelsorian woman had upset her, reminding her of the hateful way the Gwyndlyn had cast her and her twin sister out. How they'd made them feel cheap, inferior, damaged. Unwanted. All because she'd opposed Layla's plan to raise the Velorian girl. Tala had made them choose. Either Layla's dangerous plan to raise the Velorian, converting

her to their cause, or Marla's agenda to rid the Gwyndylyn of the Velorian cancer. Of course those small-minded pawns had sided with Tala's adopted daughter. Layla always got her way.

If not for the Church, Marla would have been forced to live with the Ordinaries after she left *Rivera*. The Church had taken her in during the time it took her to set up her business of training the *Kella'Pimes* and humans.

Now the Church had given her a mission. They had chosen her to carry the secret of the Goddess, granting her a portion of the power that came from Her Worship. She now lived only for the day when she'd make the Gwyndylyn pay for accepting the Velorian girl in their midst. For bringing Baalan's Curse down on them. For casting her out.

She smiled grimly at those thoughts as she guided her flitter toward an old section of the city. Soon, very soon, it would be time. And all of Rostran would shudder beneath the power of the Goddess.

Kalik hardly noticed Marla's silence as he stared out of the transparent bubble at the strange architecture and crowds of people. He was thrilled when she landed in a street lined with artist's boutiques and other small shops. The sidewalks were crowded with people who looked very human, not artificially perfect like those back at the palace.

Marla stepped out of the flitter without a word to stride down an alley. Kalik smiled back at the curious looks he got from the people on the street as he ran to catch up with her. The alley narrowed and grew dark before finally ending at a large, metal door. A very strong looking hasp and heavy padlock secured it, the hasp twice as thick as his thumb. Marla felt around above the doorframe for something.

"Looking for the key?"

"Klibra!" she cursed. "It's supposed to be here. Would you go back and check over the other door. The one halfway down the alley."

Kalik turned to walk away. Marla watched his back for a moment before reaching down and slipped two fingers through each side of the padlock hasp. It was made of pure Vendorian steel and designed to resist the strength of even a fully-empowered Prime.

A glance over her shoulder confirmed that Kalik was still busy hunting for the other key. She kept her back to him as she began to twist the hasp in her fingers. Slender muscles flexed powerfully across her back and arms. She held her breath, and pulled outward with her unusual strength, twisting her wrists at the same time. Strong tendons stood in bold relief as she focused her raw strength into the lock. Vendorian steel was ten times stronger than ordinary steel, but even it began to bend slightly under her phenomenal strength. She gritted her teeth and twisted harder yet, and the exotic steel gave off a tortured scream as it went into overstress. It suddenly failed with a sharp pinging *snap*. She quickly gathered up the broken pieces of steel and dropped them covertly into the trashcan beside the door.

"I found it," she called to Kalik, flexing her fingers behind her back to work the cramps out of them.

Kalik walked back down the alley to follow her inside. He was surprised to see that Marla looked even stronger now. His slender shoulders and back in particular were a maze of hard, ropey muscle. He chalked it up to the change in lighting.

A central sophrat bubbled away much like the one back in the palace room and a series of luxuriously thick rugs were arrayed on the floor around the sophrat. The room illumination came from the ceiling, which used colored lights to simulate the blues, oranges and reds of a sunset. The air was warm and fragrant with flowers. Softly ethereal music played in the background. The overall effect was both relaxing and very intimate.

"Just make yourself comfortable," Marla said as she walked through an inner door. "I'll be right back."

Kalik picked up the first of many glass statues that were arrayed around the room. It depicted a man and a woman making love in an impossibly complicated position. The man was ridiculously endowed. He looked at several others. More exotic positions, similar endowment, both men and women. Whatever doubts he'd had as to the type of training a *promis* performed now vanished. He inhaled the sweet scent of honey and wildflower that filled the room, and a ripple of excitement coursed through his body, pushing away his usual fears.

"Do you like my studio?" Marla said as she walked back through the door. "My sister and I share it."

She was wearing a simple white gown similar to the one Alisa had worn when they left the ship. The hem was also erotically short, showing off her long legs to good advantage. Oversized nipples tented beneath the sheer fabric. She was carefully fixing a thin gold chain around her neck. She grasped both ends in one hand and pulled them gently together as she looked down at her hand, and a tiny starburst of light welded the chain into a loop, while severing a dangling end. Another chain was fixed around her waist.

"How did you do that?" Kalik asked, impressed. The flash had been so bright that he saw spots in front of his eyes.

"Gwyndlyn magic." She let the newly formed necklace fall across her chest as she looked up to smile at him. Her eyes seemed a lighter shade of blue now despite the dim lighting. "So, tell me about your experiences with women? Are you skilled in love?"

Kalik was taken aback, but had enough self-possession to evade. "Now that's a direct enough question."

"Then you should be able to answer it directly."

He cast his eyes down at his feet, which had been shuffling involuntarily since she'd returned. "I haven't. I mean, not really."

"Haven't what?"

"Made love. To a woman."

Marla's eyebrows lifted. "Then you like men?"

"No, I mean, not like that," Kalik replied quickly.

"I find this a bit unbelievable. Anyone can see that your crewmate desires to lie with you. You haven't honored her? Not even once?"

"Alisa? No way, she's a friend."

"And being a friend means you can't honor her?" Marla was incredulous.

"Well, no not really. But it can complicate things. Our friendship is more important than anything else."

"On Rostran, if you shunned her like that, she'd become your bitter enemy. Friendships are made in bed."

"Our culture is different from yours."

"Obviously," Marla said disgustedly. She walked over to turn the sophrat bubbler up higher, then spun around to face Kalik. She rested her hands on her hips. "Andre Kalik, do you realize that there are more than seven-hundred ways that a Rostran man must honor a woman?"

"Seven hundred?" he gulped. "And by honor, I suppose you mean love? As in, making love?"

"Most men your age already know at least two hundred of them. The men I have trained are far more accomplished than that."

"What about women? How many ways are you trained to honor a man?"

"It doesn't work that way. Men gain value in their lives by honoring us. Besides, male sexuality is more limited than a woman's. Men have simpler needs. By pleasing us, they please themselves."

"And your men actually learn all those hundreds of ways? How in the world can they remember them all?"

"That's what a *promis* like my sister and I do. We are experts in all of them, and we teach our students to become good citizens."

"Good citizens? Which means, good at making love?"

Marla shrugged. "We prefer to call it honoring."

"So what are you going to teach me? We don't have months or years or whatever I'm sure it normally takes."

"Just a few basics. If you can master a bare dozen ways of honoring, you might be able to make it through the Conjugational without embarrassing your entire race. I happen to know Layla's favorites, so we'll work on those first."

Kalik was both amused and excited now. A bare dozen techniques? He felt like he'd won a lottery. A wild thrill started to grow inside him, almost an electric spark. Something was in the air, his every breath making him feel more and more alive. Stronger and more vital too. Strangely confident. Relaxed too. No, not exactly relaxed. Excited. And very, very aroused. On the other hand, there was Marla and her profession. Her apparent accessibility. There were no feelings to be hurt here, no relationships to preserve, and no future to worry about. She was merely a teacher. A very beautiful one at that.

"We'll start with teaching you the right way to honor a woman as you undress her. Her first *hala* should occur at that time."

"*Hala?*" he asked with a chuckle. If that was what he thought it was, the name was perfect. It was the kind of thing he'd seen women scream during the moment in those porn movies he occasionally borrowed from Jones down in Engineering. "I'm expected to bring a woman to *hala* merely by undressing her?" he asked doubtfully.

She rolled her eyes. This was going to be even harder than she'd first thought.

## Chapter 17

(Date: 1052-11-01, 12:15 ST)

Alisa changed into a sleeveless red top and short white skirt after Kalik left. She sat down at the desk to unpack her instruments. She tried to use them to scan the surrounding rooms, but was frustrated to find that her instruments couldn't sense anything beyond the walls. She tried again with her own vision, but saw only faint blurs. She dropped the useless instrument on her desk and blinked her eyes in frustration. Nothing worked on this damn planet. Clearly, if she was going to figure out the mysteries of the Rostran culture, she was going to have to explore on foot.

Unfortunately, Marla had left the impression that someone would come to see her. Likely the Prince himself. But frustratingly, she'd left no specifics as to when.

She rose to walk outside into the private courtyard, feeling restless and confined. The sun was directly overhead now. She was pleased to discover a small well-equipped gym by the back wall. A quick look at the weights told her that she wasn't going to have to put on the other piece of gold jewelry to get a good workout. The belly chain would be more than enough.

The smallest free weights started at forty kilos and went up to an amazing four-hundred kilos. Obviously the Rostrans were an even more athletic race than she'd expected. She remembered Marla's comment about the Prince, and that sent a wicked tingle of desire through her body. A man strong enough to work out with these weights would have a dozen times human strength. She'd never been with a man who was stronger than herself, no matter how much gold she wore.

She grunted one of the mid-sized weights off the ground. She slowly cleaned the 100-kg bar before lifting it over her head and began to work on her shoulders. The gold weakened her enough to make it an effort. She quickly



found that she loved the feeling of her muscles working, burning slightly from the strain.

## Chapter 18

*(Date: 1052-11-01, 12:45 ST)*

She was soaked in sweat when the door chime rang a half hour later.

"Come in," she called loudly as she quickly racked the huge weight. She continued her routine, laying on the grass to do one-handed pushups, trying to make it look like she was working at it. Her pumped up muscles and sweaty hair provide ample evidence of her exertions.

A man's deep voice came from inside the room. "Hello?"

"Out here."

Alisa closed her eyes and focused on making her workout look real. When she opened them minutes later, she was startled to see an extraordinarily handsome man leaning against the frame of the open door. Her heart leaped as he smiled so beautifully that she felt her heart melt. He was well over two meters tall, his body powerfully muscled yet lean and tight like a dancer, his chiseled chin and high cheekbones making him look incredibly handsome. His jet-black hair was long for a man and parted in the middle. Startlingly aquamarine eyes lit his face, and his mouth was wide and inviting. The kind of mouth that was made for kissing.

She caught herself in that last thought, and quickly turned back to her pushups, completing another fifty before she switched hands and repeated the routine. Her heart was racing when she finally stood up and stretched. She tried not to stare at him as she bent forward with her legs straight, bending herself double to press her face against her knees as she hugged her legs tightly. She held the position for a long minute before straightening up and to lean backward, bending herself double the other way. She felt her hair pooling around her feet as the back of her head touched her ankles. When she straightened up the second time, her visitor was smiling even brighter.

"Very impressive flexibility," he said sincerely. "You are in remarkable shape. I've never seen anyone so fit who began life as merely human."

Alisa shook her arms out and twisted her shoulders to complete her loosening stretch. "Began? I don't understand."

"Clearly you have been enhanced. You are more like one of the chosen than merely human."

Alisa's was startled by his words. It was the kind of thing an Arion would say.

"And you aren't? Human?"

He laughed. "Of course not. Especially not since the Goddess worked her magic on me."

Alisa was really confused now, but she couldn't help but laugh silently to herself. First Marla and now this man, both talking about a goddess enhancing them. Whoever this so-called goddess was, she did good work. His body was slender and flexible, yet like Marla's, was fantastically muscled at the same time. Every muscle was cut, yet he wasn't vascular. There was no possible way a human could possess that degree of physical perfection.

That left two possibilities. A human who'd been enhanced by a Supremis, or he was descended from Arion genetic track.

She caught herself glancing at the way his pants were bulging in a completely intriguing way. Arion suddenly made more sense. That thought made her shiver, and not with fear but with tantalizing anticipation. "To what do I owe the honor of your visit?"

"Honor?" he laughed. "What do you know about honor?"

"You are Prince Talak, if I may be so bold as to guess. And if so, then you are about to be married, yet you've come to welcome me to your Conjugational in the way of a Rostran man. It takes a special kind of man to leave his *bricha* at such a time to honor an Outworlder."

"Then you do know who I am? I wasn't sure the way you were ignoring me. And I'm pleased you have learned some of our words. But what do you know about our feelings toward Outworlders?"

Alisa toweled off as she walked closer to him. "I know that your society is closed to Outworlders." She swallowed hard as she daringly said what was on her mind. "And now I know that your heritage isn't Terran."

"Not in the last thousand years. But before that, the legends say we shared a common ancestry with you." He smiled. "Of course, only the Clerics dare say those words in public."

He reached out to take her hand in his, raising it to gently kiss her fingers. Alisa gasped as an electric spark traveled raced through her body, finding its way to her most intimate spots. Her eyelids fluttered and she sighed with contentment.

Contact pheromones, a part of her realized too late? But how could a chemical bypass her nearly absolute invulnerability? Whatever was happening, she felt like she was flying. The air around her quickly grew scented with her own pheromones. Initially a minor side effect of her workout, Talak's simple touch had transformed her.

Damn the gold!

She heard his heart quickening as he inhaled her scent. His pupils dilated as he held onto her hand for an inordinately long time. His reaction was even more dramatic than hers by the time she finally slipped her hand away. Yet he took his own quickening in stride. As if he knew exactly what was happening between them.

He smiled handsomely again. "By the Goddess, I've been kissed with less passion than a mere handshake from you. You've even gained your mentor's pheromonic abilities. A most excellent enhancement."

"*Enhancement?*" Alisa thought herself. Talak thought she was an enhanced human? Why would he jump to that conclusion first?

She tried to focus on the consequences of that assumption, but was frustrated as her thoughts faded back into that fuzzy softness. Instead of the orderly flow of analytical thoughts, she was swept away by a cascade of growing desires that surged ever more powerfully through her body. She fought to keep control, cursing silently as she felt the tingling buzz of the gold mingling with the compelling intoxication of his pheromones. A sudden rush of desire overwhelmed her, and her last logical thought was the self-indulgent rationalization that if there was ever a time and place to give herself up to her genetic mandate, then this was it. Besides, she'd used the last of her self-control on Kalik anyway.

She stopped trying to think, and instead turned away from Talak to walk toward the door to her room. Her feet felt so light that she nearly lost her balance. Talak reached out to steady her, but she pulled away to walk unsteadily past him. His touch further inflamed her, making her feel so strangely warm and relaxed at the same time. Without thinking, she pulled her red top off, dropping it on the floor in her wake. Her skirt followed it a moment later. Her body felt so wonderful without the clothing.

The room blurred into a sea of pastels as she walked over to the edge of the broad sophrat. Without thinking, she dove gracefully into it, glanced off the shallow bottom to swim over and curl up at the bottom. She turned and looked wide-eyed back through the bubbling water. Talak was standing at the far side, slowly undressing, knowing she was watching him. She gasped and nearly swallowed a mouthful of fragrant water as his manhood was revealed. No pubic hair. Alisa had never before seen a man who she would consider beautiful below the waist. Dramatic yes, but not... beautiful.

She rose back to the surface to meet his eyes as he slowly walked down the steps into the water. He moved slowly and sensually, his eyes warm as they stared deeply into hers, his every gesture attuned to her growing desires. Unlike Kalik, this prince of men knew exactly how to behave in a hot tub.

## Chapter 19

*(Date: 1052-11-01, 22:00 ST)*

Kalik proved to be a gifted learner. Marla had been teaching him for more than eight wondrous hours by now, most of that time waiting for him to recover from his exertions. He'd used that time to talk about his world, about his ship, about his science. Marla had been hesitant to reveal much of herself.

Other than her body, of course. She was in the midst of showing off her amazing flexibility by leaning back so far that her head was resting on the floor between his feet. She was rocking herself back and forth as he thrust against

her with his pelvic muscles as hard as he could. She held him tightly inside herself, waves of rippling softness seemingly working to draw him in even deeper. This was a basic and conventional position, or so she'd claimed, and reputedly one of the Princess' favorites.

Kalik thought he'd died and gone to erotic heaven. Marla was so beautiful. Her skin was so soft, her kisses so passionate yet her body was so tight as she took him. His hesitation and shyness had long ago evaporated, and he was now intent on making up for lost time. Why had he always been so afraid of letting go?

The scent of wildflowers was stronger in the air now. Also something magical, almost like sandal wood, but with an invigorating effect that made him feel so alive that his hair stood on end. Whatever drugs she was using on him, he'd become indefatigable.

He wasn't going to complain, for Marla was so willing, her kisses so warm, her body so accessible. She was strong and athletic and sure of herself, playful even. Most excitingly, she was intent on teaching him how to please her, so she told him exactly how he was doing. Her abrupt mannerisms of earlier had been replaced by the intimate glow of two lovers. She was patient, even when she made him go back and repeat a lesson. He failed one of them deliberately, just so he could try a favorite position again.

Marla straightened back up to smile down at him as she built her inner strength. She told him that this was supposed to be a contest of strength, then she mumbled something about gold making it a challenge for her, but he didn't understand that part. She claimed it was a woman's goal to try to delay a man, while the man tried to encourage the woman to let go.

She was very careful not to grip him too hard. Despite putting on a second wide choker of heavy gold and golden handcuffs to hold her hands safely behind her back, enough of the Goddess' power flowed through her that her strength was still far greater than his. Kalik thought the cuffs were kinky and seemed to enjoy putting them on her.

She released her intimate pressure just enough to give him his freedom, and he shouted hoarsely and rolled her over on her back to finish with his own strength. His sudden enthusiasm was so great that he drove her across the floor until her head dangled into the steaming sophrat. She wrapped her legs around him and flipped them both backward in an amazingly athletic move that carried them out into the center of the huge sophrat. They landed with a huge splash and nearly drowned each other as they finished their passions at the bottom of the tub.

They lay wetly on the thick rugs now, the warm air drying their skin, her hands free of the golden cuffs.

"That was creative, even inspired, Kalik. You're very good at adding your own moves when you forget to do what I tell you. You have natural talent at honoring a woman."

He beamed at the compliment. "And what was that back flip, Marla? I thought we'd suddenly started flying."

"This isn't a science, Kalik. It's art. Free expression is encouraged."

"You lifted us both ten meters off the floor."

"I'm somewhat fit."

"Modesty doesn't wear well on you. Even a gen-teched athlete would have been proud of that move."

Marla smiled but made no attempt to answer his obvious question about her strength.

"I wonder if it's mathematically possible to describe all these positions we've been trying."

She laughed for the first time. A low, throaty laugh. "Only a scientist would lay naked beside me thinking abstract mathematical thoughts."

"And what would other men be doing?"

"Practicing technique eleven."

"Which is?"

"You want it in technical or layman's terms?"

"Since you've just made fun of me for being a scientist, layman's of course."

She rolled over to rest her head on his chest. Her hand encircled his steadfast manhood. She held him very tightly, feeling the growing strength in his *prahna*. Between his enhancement and his eagerness to please, not to mention his intelligence, he was proving to be an interesting student. He was also responding better than any other human to the drugs, his response eclipsing even a Betan. If she didn't know better, she'd have guessed that he'd spent a great deal of time in close proximity to a Gwyndylyn. Breathing in the air that surrounded one of the sisters for hundreds of hours had been known to transfer some of their mutagenic viruses. Add in a large enough dose of pheromones, and it could sometimes activate the scarce virus to effect a slight enhancement of the man's DNA.

"Technique eleven is a man's power play," she started to explain. "It's very athletic and natural for men. It's often considered a variety of the sword dance of the Gwyndylyn."

"It involves a sword?" Kalik asked, a bit worried now.

"Not cold steel. The warmer kind."

"I don't understand?"

"I want you to imagine you are an accomplished warrior, deadly and strong, and I am a Heathen who must be destroyed. You must try to kill me by impaling me on your long, powerful sword. We're talking violent here." She held his *prahna* even tighter.

"Ooh... very kinky..." Kalik gasped, his right eyebrow rising. "Ritual combat in bed? My *prahna* as the righteous sword of honor?"

Marla smiled sexily as she slowly kissed him, further enhancing the magic of her pheromones and the drugs. "The princess loves the primitive athleticism of the sword dance almost as much as I do. And I'm starting to have such a thing about your particular sword."

## Chapter 20

*(Date: 1052-11-02, 05:35 ST)*

Marla dropped Kalik back at the Palace just before dawn. He staggered through the door to find that the room looked as if a tornado had ripped through it. The sophrat was half emptied and the lower half of the room was flooded. Clothing was scattered everywhere. Decorations had been knocked off dressers and pictures torn off the walls. The bed linens were more off the bed than on it, some of them torn. The air was full of honey and wildflower musk. And there, in the middle of the huge bed, Alisa lay curled up, smiling in her sleep.

Alone, thank God.

He walked closer, gratified to see that her wig was still firmly in place. Where he might have averted his eyes before last night, he now stared at her body, unconsciously comparing her to Marla. While Marla had been lean and hard, her body almost too muscular, Alisa was curvaceous and stunningly beautiful, especially the way she was lying so innocently on the bed. Sprawled half on her back, legs open, her head bent to the side as she snuggled into the pillow, she was breathing deeply in a sound sleep.

He felt a sense of guilty pleasure as he studied her tanned skin from head to toe: like Marla, she was completely flawless, not even the slightest wrinkle or discoloration on her skin. Yet unlike Marla, even the hidden corners of Alisa's body were perfect. From her pronounced nipples to the sensual folds of her sex, to the curve of her thighs, there was nothing that he could imagine changing, not even in his wildest imagination. Her tanned skin seemed to glow as if the sun was blessing it even now. He felt himself rising with desire again, something that should have been impossible after the last twelve hours.

He pushed those feelings back. Alisa was his friend, not his teacher. Certainly not his lover. Besides, the bone-aching tiredness of the long night was not to be ignored. He gently pulled the torn sheet up over her and walked around to undress on his side of the wide bed. He slipped under the covers to lie a few feet away from her. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, only to find he was intensely aware of Alisa lying naked in the bed. He was very aware of his own nakedness. He shivered, suddenly feeling cold and lonely. After lying in Marla's warm arms, her lovemaking enveloping him in warm desire, he didn't

want to sleep alone. Alisa would understand too, or so he told himself as he slid over to spoon himself up against her back.

He found her skin was so smooth, her body so delicate, and so much softer than Marla's hardness. She murmured in her sleep and smiled as she snuggled closer to him. He draped his arm around over her waist as he breathed in the sweet perfume of her hair.

His eyes slowly closed, guiding him down the path to his dreams.

Dreams about Alisa Liddell.

## Chapter 21

*(Date: 1052-11-02, 07:55 ST)*

Alisa woke to the sound of a knock on the door. She smiled in her half sleep as warm memories of the last night returned. The Prince had been so charming and affectionate, seemingly tuned in to her every feeling and desire. Not to mention incredibly athletic and creative. They'd made love in dozens of ways, most of them impossible for humans, starting from the bottom of the pool and ending up hanging off the bed banners. He was so strong, so sure of himself and seemingly inexhaustible. Their bodies came together with the familiarity of old lovers combined with the exciting newness of an intoxicated midnight stand. For the first time in her life, she'd been able to release that secret passion that lived so deeply inside her. So much so that the last thing she remembered was flying from climax to climax like a stone skipping endlessly across a pond. She'd felt totally helpless and safe in his strong arms.

That sexy thought woke her up a bit further. She reached sleepily up to confirm that her wig was still in place, only to find a man's hand resting on her breast. Talak was still here. She smiled as she turned his way, thinking wickedly about how she was going to use the part of a man's body that always awoke first.

She reached down to hold him as she turned, he was indeed awakening but had a long ways to go yet to attain last night's magnificence, only to freeze as she found herself staring into Kalik's face. She quickly pulled her hand back as she rolled back away from him, wide away now but confused. Had she and Kalik...

A louder knock on the door interrupted that thought. She leaned closer to him, he was exhausted and sleeping soundly, and sniffed. She found his musky scent was mingled with Marla's. But none of her own. His honor was still intact. At least with her.

Marla, on the other hand, had obviously made a man out of him.

She rose gently from the bed to walk toward the door, feeling warm and cozy inside, much like she imagined a cat basking in the sun might feel. Talak

had certainly lived up to his people's reputation. Extreme sex was the only way to describe it. A little bit of heaven itself. She caught herself in that misplaced thought as she opened the door, realizing that she was starting to think like a Velorian. But given that this was Rostran...

She found Talak standing on her doorstep. Crossing her arms, she leaned against the doorframe to stare coolly back at him. "So what brings the Prince of Rostran back to my doorstep so early this morning? Forget something?"

He bowed gallantly. "Nothing but perhaps my heart."

Alisa laughed. "Now that's a *really* good line for the morning after. It beats flowers any day."

He smiled so beautifully that she felt her heart warming again. This was going to get complicated. Kalik was sleeping behind her, Talak standing in front, and she wanted both of them. A very Velorian emotion, but Kalik would never understand.

"Layla and I would like to invite you to spend the day with us, Alisa," Talak said happily. "To show you around her home."

Alisa glanced hesitantly back at Kalik. "I'm afraid my shipmate is still sleeping."

"Let him. He'll need his strength again tonight. Marla is only half finished with him."

"Lucky for him," Alisa said, suddenly not liking the sound of that. She just wanted to curl back up with Kalik. They would talk, or whatever, when he awoke. Then she remembered Talak's incredible power, and her body tingled delightfully. Kalik did need his sleep. She thought instead of the way Talak had taken her places in loving that she'd never been before. How strange was that? Yesterday she'd sworn off men, and now she was sleeping with a man who could move her world. And she wanted to sleep with another man. She didn't want to think too much about that, and instead just went with her feelings. She stepped outside to close the door behind her. It wasn't until the door latched shut that she realized she was making a very Velorian choice. For the first time in her life, she didn't care.

"Your crewmate must be ready when he finally honors Layla," Talak continued as he saw the undecided look in her eyes fading. "She is full of the *dala'kar* which is very dangerous if the man is not very strong and skillful."

Alisa cringed inside from that last thought. She was the girl who'd never wanted to grow up Velorian, and now she was sleeping with another superhuman. She tried not to think too much about that, but unbidden memories of Talak's powerful body sent irresistible tingles through her own. "Just as you were in the throes of *daka* last night, my prince," she whispered sexily.

Talak took her hand to guide her toward his flitter. "I wanted to compliment you on that. It is said that no human woman can satisfy a Rostran man in *daka*. Not even an enhanced human. But you did more than that. You exhausted me. Layla is curious as to how that is possible?"



Alisa bent down to slip through the low door of the streamlined flitter. The cool, shaded interior was full of soft leather and richly polished wood. Some very advanced displays made up the dashboard. Arion technology. Talak walked around and entered through the clamshell door on his side.

"You told your conjugal mate about us, Talak? About last night?"

Talak looked puzzled. "Of course. Why would I not? She knew that I was coming to honor you."

"Amazing," Alisa breathed. Then louder, "What did you say to make her so curious?"

"Fascinated is a better word. Maybe even a little jealous. She had assumed that only she had the strength to satisfy the fever in me."

Alisa grimaced. This wasn't good. She'd obviously let way too much of the Velorian out last night.

"Clearly you have been enhanced by someone very powerful," he offered as he tried to try to draw her out. "An Empire Loyalist perhaps?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, I am a *kel'la prime* and you had nearly my strength and all my endurance. And loving skills that Aphrodite herself would have envied."

"You know of Aphrodite? The Velorians consider her their own."

"They are ignorant," he said darkly. "But I will grant that some Galen do play favorites."

Alisa wasn't sure what to say as Talak busied himself with the controls. The flitter rose into the air with a soft hum. The Palace fell away below them to reveal a city that was composed of gigantic green parks with low buildings lining them. Looking closer, she saw colorful flower gardens and tree-lined greenways. "The palace and the city around it is beautiful, Talak."

"My grandmother was one of the architects."

"So what's this about a *kel'la prime*?"

"What do you know about Arions?"

"That they come in two sizes. Prime and Betan."

"A *kel'la prime* is something in between. An enhanced Betan."

Alisa nodded, having already suspected that. "So, is everyone here Arion?"

"Not at all," Talak answered as he banked the flitter between two oncoming lines of motorcycle-like single-seaters. The ships missed each other by scant meters despite closing at several hundred kilometers per hour. All above the city a delicate dance was being played out. Flitters of various sizes swirled around each other in an aerial ballet. It looked dangerous until Alisa reminded herself that Arions were very hard to hurt. Especially if they were enhanced.

"But all the Betans here are enhanced?"

"Most. But even then, the strength of *kel'la primes* varies a lot though. I'm about ten times stronger than a normal Betan of my build should be. That's pretty much on the high end of an Enhancee."

"But hardly a match for a Prime."

"As Layla keeps reminding me. But nobody here wants a male Prime in our midst. The Czet'lan was the last, and that was a century ago."

"Was he involved in settling the planet?"

"Not by choice. He was the captain of the Arion starship that crashed here."

"So where did the humans come from then?"

"Prisoners. The *Admiral Sarkin'an*, the Czet'lan's ship, had conquered a human world and was transporting several thousand survivors to a mining colony."

"So three groups came, but certainly not as equals."

Talak nodded. "We have since learned to cooperate. But equality is a human myth. Especially since the first group were fearsome warriors of the old Empire. They'd fought a battle against the Velorians, and the survivors included a wounded Protector and dozens of female Primes and the Czet'lan. The Czet'lan was eventually cast out when he proved more interested in continued conquest than peace."

"Leaving behind the Gwyndylyn. The female Primes."

"Exactly."

"So what happened to the captured Velorian?"

"It has not been written, although it is said that the Clerics know. She was never seen after the ship landed."

Alisa was intrigued. "So the second group was made up of Betans? Like you."

"Ship's crew mostly. Since then, as I mentioned, most of us have been enhanced by the Gwyndylyn. We *kel'la prime* are... improved I guess you'd say. For a very special purpose."

"Can I guess?" she smiled at him.

Talak laughed. "After last night, you have to guess?"

"Oh, you mean that little talent of yours? You know, fucking my brains out? Yeah, I kind of noticed that."

Talak looked puzzled. "What is this word, fucking? And I did not hurt your brains did I?"

Alisa couldn't help but laugh. He was as innocent as Kalik in some ways. She chalked it up to Rostran being an isolated world. "Just old Terran slang, but a word you should really know. Something you are extremely good at."

"Ah, you mean my way of honoring a woman?"

"With intensity and skill. Not to mention a fair bit of muscle. And lots and lots of endurance."

"Fuck. A good word if it means all that."

"Yeah, Layla will just love it. But you said three groups?"

"Humans too, of course. Many of them were later enhanced by the Gwyndylyn, although not as successfully as you are. You have exceptional genetics, Alisa. I held nothing back last night. Not even the fever."

Alisa shivered. This discussion of genetics was getting way too close to home. Between Kalik's growing curiosity about her heritage, and now Talak thinking she'd been enhanced by a Supremis, she felt increasingly transparent. The only bright spot was that the Rostrans believed their hated enemy wouldn't come to their world unless it was to attack and kill them. She'd overheard enough conversations to know that most Rostrans thought the so-called Heathens were mindless demons.

The propaganda created a blind spot. A fatal one if a Protector decided to infiltrate their inner circle as she was doing. But potentially fatal to her as well if the Rostrans connected the dots. They'd likely react before thinking.

She pushed that dark thought behind her as she pressed her forehead to the transparent shell of the flitter and looked down on the beautiful world below. "So, where are we going, my prince?"

"To Layla's *salon*. She's still preparing for her sword dance. It is part of the Rites that she and her sisters must dance on the third night. That's why the *dala'kar* has such a hold on her now."

"You have to tell me more about this Conjugational, Talak."

Talak began to describe the ceremony and its many forms as they flew beyond the fringes of the city. The grassy swaths of the greenways gradually turned to broad forests of hardwood trees and then to rocky and rugged terrain. A virgin landscape of pine forest and mountain lakes. The flitter climbed up a long, steep valley and finally over a high, craggy mountain range. It hummed over the snowy summits before plunging dizzily into a deep canyon on the other side. A roaring river formed the canyon bottom, and numerous waterfalls cascaded down tall cliffs to feed it, send a glowing mist spreading across the valley floor.

They followed the narrow twisting canyon for fifty kilometers before it gradually began opening up into grassy meadows. They banked around a massive rock formation that had been sculpted into the shape of a woman, The Goddess Tyla, Talak said. Alisa's awe increased as an elaborate castle of soaring towers came into view. It was perched on a narrow bench that had been cut into one wall of the canyon. Located a hundred meters above the river, it looked like something out of a fairy tale.

"This is *Rivera*, the home of the Gwyndylyn *salon*."

Alisa looked down nervously at the castle and surrounding fields. Dozens of young women were exercising, many of them with weapons. She saw the flash of sword and the sparkling glare of lasers. Even the actinic flash of a GAR. "All of them are Primes?" she asked, her stomach tightening.

"It is not polite to use words from the old Empire here in sanctuary. They are simply Gwyndylyn now."

"Your entire world broke away from the Empire? I didn't think that was possible."

"The Empire doesn't know we're here. Our ancestors' ship was disabled from that battle, and we fell into a mysterious hole in space and wound up here. The Czet'lan tried at first to find a way back, but no one could find the portal to the hole from this side. It took some time before we realized the opportunity."

"Opportunity?" Alisa asked, realizing with a shock the *Flame's* penetration of Cygnias might not have been the first entry after all.

"To live freely. To not have to fight the war against the Heathens any longer."

Heathens. That hateful word again. "That must have been wonderful," she mumbled.

"No, it was terrifying at first, or so my mother told me. They worried that the Empire would find them and punish them for desertion. But then the Goddess came and we stopped worrying. "

"Tyla? I hear reference to her all the time. Who, or what, is she?"

Talak looked at her for a long moment, and then shook his head. "I should not be the one to say more. If you please Layla, perhaps you will learn more tonight."

"So how do I please your mate?"

"You have already pleased me," Talak grinned. "That is a good start."

"Very strange," Alisa whispered under her breath.

## Chapter 22

(Date: 1052-11-02, 09:00 ST)

Talak circled the fields below the castle before descending to touch down lightly next to the castle entrance and stepped out. He was instantly mobbed by a dozen young girls from age five to eight.

"Talak, Talak," the young ones cried, rushing up to hug his legs. "You've been away too long." They swarmed over him like a human wave. He stayed on his feet until two of the littlest ones pulled his legs in opposite directions and he went down hard. He was promptly buried beneath his tiny attackers.

Alisa was shocked to realize that the girls were all empowered Primes. Still, she couldn't help but smile as she watched the way they played. Children were children in every culture, and Talak was obviously a favorite with them. She could also see that despite the rough play, the girls were being gentle. Even at five, a Prime would have greater strength than Talak.

Something yellow flashed in the distance to draw Alisa's attention away. She looked out over the wide grassy meadow to see a horse galloping her way, coming directly out of the morning sun. It ran with great speed, leaping high over a hedge and then crossing a wide stream in a splash of sunlit water. She lifted her hand to shield the sun's glare from her eyes, and saw the last thing she'd expected so see on this world.

A girl with long golden hair was riding bareback!

Alisa stared in astonishment as the blonde reined the horse to a fast stop and literally flew off its back to land lightly in front of Talak. She looked to be ten years old, but was tall for her age, nearly 1.5 meters. Her straight hair hung below her shoulder blades, and she wore only a short brown leather skirt, a narrow strap crossing one shoulder to hold it up. Her blue eyes were large for the size of her face, the irises intensely blue.



She stood before the entrance to the castle, her legs slightly spread, hands on her hips, clearly blocking his way. "You promised me a contest the next time you visited," she said, her blue eyes twinkling in amusement. "Are you ready for battle now, *Kel'la Prime*?"

A ripple of giggling excitement raced through the little ones. They circled around to cheer Talak on. He quickly got into the game, grinning fiercely as he feinted to one side then the other, crouching low like a wrestler.

"You can take her, Talak," one of the girls shouted.

"She's been mean," a little one chimed in. "Teach her a lesson."

The second oldest, a girl of eight, walked over to stand at Alisa's side. She winked as Alisa looked down at her. "Talak always tries, but he doesn't stand a chance against Lara. Nobody here does."

Talak picked up a heavy spear from the ground and threw it at Lara. It was made of iron and looked like it weighted fifty kilos. She didn't flinch as it bounced from her bare chest to land bent at her feet.

"Was that supposed to hurt?" she asked innocently.

"No, but this will." He grabbed a laser from the weapon rack and fired it at point blank range. While the Gwyndlyn might regard it as little more than a toy, it struck with enough power to vaporize a human's body. Instead of doing that, the beam splashed harmlessly over her shoulders, making her skin glow, its only effect that of igniting her leather skirt.

Talak dove at her as she looked down to pat out the flames, executing a complex maneuver in mid-air to sweep his feet under hers. At the same time, he smashed his outstretched fingers into her neck with ferocious force. The twin blows would have broken a human's legs and collapsed their windpipe, but the young girl remained standing as if her body was made of stone. It was Talak who shook the pain from his tingling arm.

Undaunted, he pressed his attack by grabbing an evil-looking mace from the rack of weapons beside the landing pad, and swung it as hard as he could at Lara's head. She ducked gracefully beneath the orb of spiked death, only to spring up and spin around in mid-air as if by magic to land on Talak's shoulders. He staggered around blindly, her smoking leather skirt covering his face as she gradually tightened her legs enough to make him drop the mace. He finally tripped over a pile of weapons and fell to his knees. Lara released him to somersault to a weightless landing a few meters away. She curtsied and bowed before the other children, all of who squealed in laughter.

Lara didn't realize what they were laughing about until she heard the swish of a weapon through the air. She turned around just in time for Talak's mace to smash into her forehead. The unexpected blow from the hundred-kilogram hammer sent her flying backward through the crowd of children to smash into the wall behind them. It collapsed to bury her beneath broken stone.

She immediately leaped back to her feet, stones flying in all directions. Before Talak could say anything, she leaped off the ground to leap over his head, her strong legs accelerating her so fast that the shockwave of her passage knocked most of the children off their feet. She landed just in front of them as she rubbed a smudge of smeared metal from her forehead. Her eyes blazed an angry blue as she sent two nearly transparent beams of energy blasting over Alisa's and Talak's heads.



Alisa spun around just in time to see a circling vulture spining out of the air, diving for the cover of the trees. A thin trail of smoke trailed behind it. It had nearly made the trees when the blinding beams converged on it to blast it out of existence. The annihilation was so complete that not even a puff of smoke remained.

"That wasn't nice, Lara," one of the other girls called out. "You're going to get in trouble again."

"I hate those filthy birds," Lara said as she walked back to stand in front of Talak and Alisa. She looked up into her face, her already large eyes opening wider. "You are not what you appear to be."

Alisa started. "I don't understand."

"Yes you do," Lara said simply, her serious expression suddenly that of a much older girl. Then her face softened back to that of a girl of ten, her voice bubbling with enthusiasm as she turned her attention back to Talak. "I can hover in place now, Talak. Watch this."

She closed her eyes to concentrate on something, and then slowly lifted both feet from the ground. She bobbed around in mid-air as she crossed her legs, then opened her eyes to look proudly into Talak's.

"Now that's a neat trick."

"It's not a trick," Lara said stubbornly.

Talak made a show of walking around her floating form, pretending to look for wires. The other girls giggled as he waved his hand over her head. Then under her legs. Lara just looked proudly ahead, trying hard not to smile. He finally paused in front of her to hold her knees. He pushed and pulled on them, but couldn't budge her from her position in space. "By the Goddess, you really are flying, Lara."

Alisa's thoughts were reeling as she watched the two of them. The girl truly was a Velorian. Could she be the daughter of the Protector on the Arion ship? Granddaughter more likely. The ship had crashed more than a century ago.

"Tala wouldn't teach me," Lara was telling Talak, "so I just figured it out on my own. Just watch how fast I can go." She extended her legs and pointed her toes, touching her feet to the wall beside her. Crouching low against the base of one of the stone columns, Lara slowly tensing her remarkable muscles like spring steel. Then, with an incredible burst of strength, she snapped her body straight. The base of the column exploded as she accelerated so rapidly that Alisa could barely follow her flight. She dove under the distant goal posts before rising straight up into the blue sky. In two seconds flat, she'd shrunk to a dot and disappeared.

"She's going to get in big trouble this time," the girl next to Alisa said ominously. "Last time she acted up, she had to clean all the toilets on the fourth floor for a week. Mother is probably going to really ground her this time."

Alisa just stared up into the blue sky, feeling as if she was in a daze. After a long moment, she blinked her eyes and walked over to help rescue Talak from his playful, young admirers. "A Velorian girl is living here, with all these Gwyndlyn?" she asked incredulously. "That's the last thing I expected to find."

Talak twisted his head from side to side as he massaged his neck. "A girl with very strong legs. She nearly broke my neck."

"Who is she? How did she get here?" Alisa kept glancing up at the sky, hoping the girl would return so they could talk.

"You'll have to ask Mother-Superior. It's supposed to be a big secret, although Lara seems to have forgotten that. She also seems to have adopted me as her Godfather. Goddess help me." He smiled as he winked at Alisa.

"It sounds like she's a bit much to handle."

"She's different than the other girls. Her looks, now her levitation, and she's stronger than any one else we've ever measured. And as you've already learned, most Rostrans call her people *Heathens*. So she's not popular with people outside the valley. Not with some of the sisters either."

"But how can she be living here? Velorians are far more civilized than..." She caught herself. She was going to say Arions."

"More civilized than the Arions? You can say that here. As I said, we have no love for the Empire."

"So why all the talk of Heathens?"



"We hate them because one of their Protectors came and attacked us about fifty years ago. She killed our leaders and we all might have perished if not for the Goddess."

"She defeated the Protector? I don't understand how that is possible."

"That's what our history says. Of course, since Mother-Superior arrived, we're even safer than we were then."

"Mother-Superior could also defend you from a Protector? I doubt that. Protectors are the premier warriors in all the universe. They are the living embodiment of what it means to be Supremis."

Talak smiled. "Repeating a Velorian boast? I would have thought you Kelsorians would know better?"

Alisa shrugged. "It's what they say."

"Wait till you meet Mother. Then you'll understand."

Alisa looked back up into the sky. No sign of the girl. "So Lara is growing up like any other Gwyndlyn then? A part of the *salon*?"

"As long as the Clerics leave her alone, yes." Talak led the way across a huge, soaring stone bridge. "They came here two years ago and demanded she be put to death in the chamber. You can imagine the reaction among the other girls. Despite what they say, they all look up to Lara. I wouldn't be surprised if she someday leads the entire *salon*."

"The leader of a colony of Primes?" Alisa said doubtfully as she walked carefully across the narrow bridge. It was barely wide enough for the two of them to walk side by side, and had no railing or curb. If you missed your step, it was three hundred meters down to some very sharp rocks.

"I admit, biases and discrimination are hard to overcome, but she could help keep our world safe. Mother won't live forever, and the Goddess' plans are inscrutable to us."

Alisa leaned over the edge of the bridge. "This looks like an oversized version of the kind of moat they used to put around Terran castles, although they used water. Even the architecture looks like ancient Earth, except everything here is larger and grander. More airy."

"Earth architecture?" Talak looked surprised. "I guess that explains something we've all wondered about. Mother-Superior claims to have visited Earth once upon a time."

Alisa looked at him doubtfully. "That's a closed world. No one visits it."

He waved his hand at the soaring architecture. "Obviously, Tala did."

## Chapter 23

(Date: 1052-11-02, 09:45 ST)

Kalik rolled over, extending his arm to reach out for Alisa. He found nothing. Quickly awaking, he sat up and looked around the room. He distinctly remembered feeling her body snuggled in his arms as he fell asleep.

"Alisa?"

Silence.

He rose to dash out to the courtyard. Empty. The hallway outside was deserted. He stepped back into the room to look on the desk. There was no note.

His heart sank. He'd wanted to say so much to her this morning. To daringly tell her how he really felt. Now she was gone. With Excelsia? Unlikely. More likely it was Talak. Marla had talked about a place called *Rivera*, home of the Gwyndlyn. It was to be the location of the Conjugational.

He sat down heavily, a hollow feeling filling his stomach as he realized the futility of his love. Alisa was a Velorian. She'd run off with her super man. It was said that no human man could possess such a woman. Even worse, if he told her how he felt, would she leave him like she had the Captain?

His thoughts returned to Talak. Marla had said his physical power was half way between a Prime and a Betan. A man forged from some of the same genetic legacy as Alisa. He cursed. What chance in hell did he have against a super man? Velorians cared only about sex, not love. It was in their genes.

He cursed under his breath as he stood up. That wasn't true for Alisa. She was his friend. His best friend in the whole universe. He knew she thought of him the same way. If she wanted to enjoy a brief interlude with some alien, then so be it. But when it was over, the two of them would be working happily in the Tank again.

That thought didn't make him feel much better. He wanted to be a lot closer to Alisa than just her boss. Her co-worker.

He looked around the wrecked room a final time and tried to imagine what had gone on here. After a moment he didn't want to imagine it anymore. Instead, he grabbed his instruments from the desk and stuffed them into a bag. Then some clothing and the fruit from the bowl by the window. Also a handful of local coins.

He was going to find her, and he was going to tell her exactly how he felt about her. Before it was too late.

## Chapter 24

(Date: 1052-11-02, 10:50 ST)

"Her name is Tala?" Alisa asked.

"Also Mother-Superior. Most just call her Mother."

"This castle design doesn't prove anything, Talak. She could have looked this style of architecture up in the databases. Just like I did. I studied Terran architecture for a semester back in the University."

Alisa actually knew a bit more about Earth than that, at least from the time before she fled Velor. Including many forbidden things. Her mother had whispered the tale of Kara and Xara only to her, assuming that it was something her Protector-bound daughter would need to know. Stories about the way those women had fought an underground war on Earth that had lasted more than a hundred years. A war of terrorism. If you believed the alarmist reports that were circulating when she'd fled Velor, the Galens had finally intervened and destroyed every Supremis within Earth's solar system. If Tala had been part of that battle, she must have left before the Galen arrived.

Talak's fingers were interlaced with Alisa's as he guided her along a wide veranda to enter what appeared to be the residential portion of the castle. They climbed fifty stories of steeply winding staircase on the inside of one of the towers to emerge onto a small landing near the top. "These are your quarters for tonight."

The room was bright and airy, with four large balconies arranged around the perimeter of the room. The ceiling overhead was steeply sloping, obviously the roof of the tower itself. The room was round, the floor and furnishings burnished hardwood and the bed was Rostran large. It was located where Alisa had expected to find a sophrat.

Talak watched her eyes as she took it all in. "No sophrat I'm afraid. The Gwyndylyn have a tradition of common bathing. There is a very large pool on the south side and outdoors. You are welcome to use it, although you might find the customs a bit unusual. Not all of the Gwyndylyn are interested in being honored by men. Some are more... self sufficient, if you know what I mean."

"Will you be joining me here tonight?"

"Do you wish for me to?"

Alisa reached out to lace her fingers in his again. "I do."

Talak laughed. "I think that's my line for tomorrow night. You wouldn't be trying to turn my head, would you?"

"Never crossed my mind," Alisa winked. "I just figured that there was probably some kind of custom about not seeing the bride before the big day."

"Good guess."

"But unlike most cultures, your duty is to keep the female visitors from getting lonely."

"Hardly a duty given such a beautiful visitor as you," Talak said as he drew her closer. "And distinctly not plural. I have eyes only for you."

Alisa snuggled into his arms, tilting her head invitingly. He kissed her. A soft kiss at first, then slowly turning deeper, more passionate. After a long

moment, Alisa slipped from his arms, breathing fast as she walked backward, holding his hands, leading him toward the bed. Now that her body had awakened, her appetite was growing Velorian large. She sat on the bed and then leaned back, pulling Talak to her. He pressed her hands over her head, leaning over her body.

"That word you taught me, Alisa. Fuck. A verb I presume. As in, would you like me to fuck you?"

Alisa laughed as she slipped her hand down his side, then inward to find that he was such a man again. His hardness sent a thrill through her body. "That sounds very weird coming from you."

"I guess talking isn't my thing," he winked sexily. "Ask anyone."

Alisa flopped limply on the bed as she released him. "Oh, God, I wish we had the time. But aren't we supposed to be meeting Layla right about now? I don't think she'd appreciate my showing up with your scent all over me."

Talak stood back up to walk over toward the window. He leaned against the wooden frame, looking down over the exercise fields. "She can be jealous at times, that is true. Which is unusual for an arranged conjugal. As the designated successor to Tala, she's become arrogant and prideful."

"Arranged conjugal? I thought you two were in love?"

Talak laughed. "Would I be enjoying your company so much if I was?"

"I figured you were just trying to be friendly." Alisa stood up to walk over and wrap her arms around his waist from behind.

"I'm not even sure Layla likes me. But our genetics are compatible, so we have been chosen to have children together."

"No love? So you don't have to be... exclusive?" Alisa asked, puzzled but somehow pleased.

"That depends. If she's ovulating, then my obligation is clear. Otherwise..." he shrugged, pausing to turn and look into Alisa's eyes. "Otherwise I can do as my heart desires."

"And she's going to be ovulating tomorrow, right?"

Talak nodded. "The conjugal is timed to the phase of the moons. For one week each month, I have a duty."

"Very pagan and primitive."

"But hardly exciting or spontaneous."

"So she's just after your genes, huh?"

He smiled thinly. "I'm just a man in any case. As you may have gathered, this is a woman's world." He turned to walk toward the door, his smile gone. "I'm going to check on the arrangements for tomorrow. I'll come back to take you to Layla when she's ready to see you."

Before Alisa could open her mouth to say anything, he was gone. She heard him taking the steps a half dozen at a time. Her thoughts followed him for a few moments, and then she shrugged. She could dig deeper into his

relationship with Layla later. Right now, she had to get dressed in something appropriate for meeting a Princess.

A quick search of the closets revealed a great deal of exotic clothing, most of it in her size. She picked out three of the less revealing outfits and laid them on the bed. They would still be considered outrageously sexy most anywhere else in the universe. She was starting to try one of them on when something burned against the back of her neck. She quickly lifted her hand to feel a hot spot on her skin. At the same time, she saw a flash of silver outside the window.

Spinning around, she found the young girl, Lara, sitting on the stone wall of the balcony. Unlike the brief attire she'd worn before, she was now dressed in a skintight outfit of polished silver that covered her from head to toe. A dazzlingly bright choker fit tightly around her neck, studded with hundreds of small, blue diamonds. The mirror-bright fabric highlighted her blonde hair, and the choker made her glow like a beacon of Velorian loveliness.

"Hello, Lara. How was your flight?"

Lara turned to look balefully at her. "I visited your ship."

Alisa looked startled. "You did? Did they see you?"

"Of course not. I don't really exist. Just ask anyone." She rested her head on her knees and turned to look back out over the landscape.

"Let me guess," Alisa smiled, "you just had a talk with the one you call Mother?"

"No, with my *zura'lan*. My teacher. She wants me to stop my levitation and walk on the ground like all the others. To give up my gift." She turned to look at Alisa, tears in her eyes. "But flying is the most wonderful, beautiful thing in the whole wide world. And they don't want me to ever do it again."

"You are Velorian, Lara. It is a gift they cannot take from you."

Lara sniffled. "You just said Velorian as if it was a nice word. The others spit the word out as if it tastes bad." She lowered her head again. "And they say it's not a gift, but a curse."

"I know, I've heard them talk about Velorians. The Heathens. But where I come from, we don't hate them."

"Kelsor 7, right? I read it on the papers inside your ship."

"How close did you get to the ship?"

Lara shrugged her shoulders girlishly. "I walked around the top for a while. It's really big. I wanted to go in, but that would wake them up. It was their sleep time I guess."

"Everyone was asleep?" That didn't sound right.

"Except for the men down in the bottom of the ship. Soldiers."

"In the Drop Bay?" She liked the sound of that even less.

"They had shiny metal suits and weapons and these small spaceships."

"Damn it," Alisa cursed under her breath. The last thing she wanted was some kind of rescue mission coming after her. They'd be slaughtered by the Gwyndylyn. "Tell me more of what you saw."

Lara was outlined by the setting sun as she described the inside of the ship and people in great detail. The darkening sky slowly faded the snowy mountains to shades of orange and red, leaving the sky a deep shade of blue. Lara ran out of words as she turned to study the beautiful scenery for a long moment. Then she looked back at Alisa, her eyes wide and sparkling. "So why do you hide hair the color of mine beneath that thing you wear?"

Alisa gasped as her worst fear was suddenly realized. Lara's enlarged eyes could apparently see better in the low tachyon field than the other Gwyndylyn. She debated lying to her, but decided on the simple variant of the truth that she'd been rehearsing.

"I had thought it polite to try to fit in here. To not flaunt my different coloration."

"You mean, to not let them know that you are a Velorian, like me?"

"I'm not. I'm human, Lara. We have many different colors of hair. Some of us look like Velorians but we're..."

Lara shook her head. "That heat you felt on your neck a minute ago was my test. If you'd been human, you would have been in great pain. Besides, I can hear the different beat of your heart."

"I'm enhanced, Lara. That makes me very tough. I once knew a..." she debated, Arion or Velorian? "... an Arion man. A Prime." No adult would believe her story, for a Prime's sexual enthusiasm was legendary. His enthusiasm would be fatal to a human woman unlucky enough to step across that particular genetic boundary. But Alisa wasn't going to explain any of that to Lara. It was something she'd never have to worry about anyway.

"Primal men can't enhance Frails," Lara said haughtily. "Their penis is too big and far too strong. Don't you know anything?"

Alisa stared for a long moment. Clearly, Lara was growing up a lot faster than a human girl. She blinked to unfreeze her thoughts. "Well, I know that this is none of your business young lady. And Frail is a very impolite Arion slur. More correctly, ordinary humans are called Terrans. A tribute to our planet of origin."

"I'm sorry if I offended you," Lara said, her eyes warm and sincere. "It's just that Frail is the only word I hear around here when people talk about ordinary humans."

"None taken," Alisa smiled, enjoying Lara's company. She seemed lost and a little lonely, but strangely polite considering her birthright. "Arions aren't known for their political correctness."

"Now you're being impolite. We're Gwyndylyn."

"Right."

"So, if you are human, then you won't mind if I do this." Lara reached out to slip her fingers under the gold chain that Alisa wore. "Just jewelry, right?"

"Don't you dare..." The chain snapped as she spoke. Alisa just stared at the chain dangling in Lara's hand.

"Oops," the girl giggled.

Alisa tried to contain the gathering rush of energy. She gritted her teeth and concentrated on staying cool, even as she felt the pressure rising, expanding inside her chest like an overinflated balloon. For a long second, it seemed as if she could contain it with sheer will power alone. "See, I told you I..."

Her words were ripped away as a explosion of pinpricks tore at the inside of her body. She fought to control the sensation, only to have an even greater surge of heat rush to all her sensitive places. This time the explosion felt like shrapnel slicing her body apart, only to turn into a thousand tiny lightning bolts that stabbed at her from all sides. A flare of light blazed inside her eyes to blind her. She screamed in pain, but her scream faded quickly into a sighing groan as the pain turn sublime. A hot flash swirled around inside her body like a pinwheel, gathering strength with each revolution until it spread downward, seemingly drawn toward the denser nerves of her ultimate desire.

"Go... leave... now!" Alisa gasped as she staggered against the side of the tower. She slipped, only to feel Lara wrapping a very strong arm around her. Her other hand found and released Alisa's wig, tossing it safely aside. Lara slipped around behind her, wrapping her legs around Alisa's hips, hooking her ankles inside Alisa's thighs as she held her with incredible strength.

"Don't touch... get away..." Alisa gasped, knowing what was coming next. Lara just held her tighter. Alisa struggled to break free with all her inflamed strength, only to have that strength turn inward on itself. The tingling buzz became a hurricane of desire that washed away all her sensibilities behind a tidal wave of pleasure. If not for Lara's restraint, she'd have tumbled over the wall to fall to the courtyard far below.

As it was, long waves of delicious agony rolled over Alisa as she arched her back, leaning her head back against Lara's shoulder, her glowing hair billowing around the two of them in a golden cloud. The spasms became so intense that they hurt, the sharp pains rolling over her again and again to leave her gasping for breath she didn't even need. Her body tensed tighter and tighter with erotic strength as she struggled to close her legs, her only thought that of trapping the heat inside. Of finding release from her torment.

Lara was very strong. Stronger even than Alisa was while in the throws of an energy surge. Still, the contest of superhuman strength gave Alisa something to focus on, a place to channel her surging energies other than merely toward ecstasy. Slowly, ever so slowly, her struggle against Lara's strength burned off the excess energy, weakening the waves of desire until they were but ripples on a deep pond of glowing arousal. Another minute passed before Alisa could lift her head and brush her hair away from her face. Her eyes were glowing as

if lit from inside as she staggered back to her feet. She hung exhaustedly over the wall, unaware that her golden hair was revealed for all to see.

Lara gently pulled her back to sit on the stone floor, her silver skinsuit glowing where it had touched Alisa's skin. She was smiling. "You look much better as a blonde."

"Why... why did you do... that?" Alisa gasped as she reached wearily to pick up her wig and start tucking her hair beneath it. She tried not to think of what had just happened. Lara was far too young to be seeing such things.

"To get you to quit pretending that you aren't a Velorian."

"That was very impolite. You knew what removing the gold would do."

"Not exactly. I've never seen anyone wear it before."

"It wouldn't have the same effect on you anyway. Not at your age."

"Too bad. You seemed to be having fun at the end."

Alisa looked up at her. Once again Lara sounded as if she was a lot older than she looked. She wondered what her real age was. "Fun? Trust me, that's not the word I was looking for. The sudden energy rush hurts." She hugged her knees to her chest, tucking her heels against her lower body to maintain her modesty. "Just pray nobody does that to you without being ready for it."

"And how do you get ready?"

"For one, you make sure you're either really far away from other people or you have someone to restrain you. And you take it off slowly."

"I restrained you."

"Someone who's... older. More... involved."

"You would have hurt Talak very badly if he'd been here. You were really strong during those... moments. Almost stronger even than me."

"You aren't old enough to know about... moments."

Lara shrugged as she waved her hand. "I'm not blind. Or deaf. Look who I live around. I don't think a Supremis can last a day without having one of those moments."

Alisa sat down heavily in the chair, remembering that Velorian girls came of age very early. But not this early. Something else was going on here. She suddenly felt very protective, and embarrassed by her loss of control. "There is something to be said for acting your age, Lara. And respecting the privacy of your elders."

"You assume I'm only as old as I look."

"Then how old are..."

"It doesn't matter," Lara interrupted Alisa's question. "I'm the only one who can see through things here. Other than Mother of course. And since no adults will talk to me, I have to figure things out on my own."

"Just don't try to grow up so fast."

Lara floated up from the floor to sit on the wall. She swung her legs over the edge, looking down at her feet. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to talk to



someone who doesn't make me pretend to be something I'm not. But I'll leave you..."

Alisa reached out to hold her hand. "No, don't go. You just have a funny way of getting people's attention."

"I embarrassed you. I'm sorry. I didn't realize that taking off the gold would make you, you know, that way. Here, take it back." She handed the broken chain back to Alisa.

Alisa took it as she floated back to her feet, turning her back to Lara. "Let me get dressed and we can talk."

"Talak is coming now to take you to see Layla. You should not wear your gold when you meet her. She has a bad temper." Before Alisa could reply, Lara slipped over the edge and disappeared below.

Alisa was still pondering that ominous comment when she heard two knocks on her door. She walked back inside the tower room, feeling weightless and free again. She struggled to keep her feet on the floor as she debated putting the chain back on. Instead, she set it on a table as she started to comb her long hair out with her fingers. She was very conscious of her nudity as she said, "come in."

Talak entered, only to freeze in the doorway as he stared back at her. "Wow. And here I thought you were getting dressed to go see Layla. But I like this look a lot better." He closed the door behind him and circled behind her to wrap his arms around her waist, his soft kisses finding that sensitive spot on her neck, just below her ear.

She giggled as she slipped from his arms. Talak's eyes were bright with desire as she turned to face him.

"You look different somehow, Alisa. Like you're glowing."

"Must be all the great sex I've been having here."

"I'd love to see you glow even brighter then," he winked.

"Maybe after I meet your loving wife to be." Alisa walked over to the bed to pick up two different outfits. "Which one should I wear? Leather or lace?"

"Lace for sure. Leather is more Layla's thing."

Alisa nodded as she began to. "Somehow I figured that." The fashion turned out to be little more than a mesh body stocking. It left her back bare, but otherwise clung to her skin, covering everything but hiding nothing. She slipped on an elegant pair of black heels to complete the outfit.

"You look incredible," Talak gushed. "No Gwyndlyn could eclipse you."

"Is that going to be a problem? Layla and her jealousies?"

"Right now, I don't care. I'm already dreaming about how I'm going to tear that thing off later."

Alisa smiled softly. "Pretty hard to hide anything under this mesh."

As good as it felt to be empowered, she realized she'd have to keep the gold handy.

"Hiding is the last thing you want to do, Alisa. Don't show any fear, and don't let intimidate you. Just keep in mind that..."

He began to regale her with stories about the tradition of warriors within the Gwyndylyn *salon* as they walked down the endlessly winding staircase.

## Chapter 25

Kalik found his way out of the palace and onto a busy street. A few aborted attempts later, he figured out how to flag down a passing public flitter. He slipped a few coins into the autopilot's Pay slot. Everyone else wore a ring that they just waved past a sensor plate.

He was scolded by an elderly woman when he sat down in the first available seat. A glance around the flitter showed that the men were sitting in the back. He got up and moved to join them, suddenly finding the joys of living in a strong matriarchy a bit less exciting than he'd first thought.

He asked a couple of the men for directions to Prince Talak's residence, but they laughed, telling him that no men save the Royalty were allowed to cross the summit of the Snowy Mountains. When he told them that the Prince had made off with his girlfriend, they grew quiet, edging further away. All but one man, who kept glancing strangely at him.

The man moved closer as the flitter grew empty as they approached the western boundary of the city. "That happened to my Dala too," he offered, his voice little more than whisper. "We were close to getting married when they came and got her. Took her to *Rivera*. Said she'd be a good Brooder."

"Brooder? *Rivera*." Kalik just looked at him, not comprehending.

"*Rivera* is where the Gwyndylyn live. The Royalty, including those accursed *kella'primes*, live near there. Those witches kidnap Ordinary women and then implant an embryo in them to carry to full term. The process is often fatal to the mother. All so that the Gwyndylyn can protect their perfect figures."

"But why the enhancement?"

"To let them survive the baby, of course. Gwyndylyn's are very strong, even before they are born." He lowered his voice further. "Enhancement is an obscenity in the eyes of the Church."

"So I gather you aren't enhanced?"

The man laughed and held out his hand. "Dargrin Cooper. Do I look enhanced to you?"

"I'm Lieutenant Andre Kalik of the Kelsorian starship *Anders Flame*." He looked closely at the man, and saw the usual blemishes and imperfections of an ordinary human. "I guess we share one thing."

"I'm glad to make your acquaintance, Lieutenant. Been hanging around the palace, hoping to get a chance to talk to you. We don't get many visitors,

especially not the rare male. And none of them ever walked around like you are. You know, without a handler."

"Handler?"

"Yeah. One of the flacks from the palace. I'm surprised they let you out on your own."

"I don't think they know I left."

"And without an ID ring, they can't track you. Interesting. Dangerous, breaking the law like that, but interesting." Dargrin turned and looked out the side of the bubble, saying nothing for a long moment. "You can't get to *Rivera*, Lieutenant. But I know some people who have eyes and ears there. I could take you to them."

The overhead display started blinking '*Last Stop*' as the flitter bus descended.

"Look, you have to get off here anyway. The flitter turns around and goes back. Why don't I introduce you to someone who might be able to help."

Kalik didn't like the look of the neighborhood they were landing in, but he didn't want to go back to that empty room and just wait. He'd seen no reference to crime on Rostran Net. "Sure, why not."

Dargrin nodded as he led the way out the door. The flitter quickly rose back into the air with a hum and disappeared.

Kalik looked around to find that the streets were filthy, the store windows covered in bars. The people on the street looked worn down, bent and haggard.

"The transport isn't so nice from here on." Dargrin turned and led the way down an alley. Kalik had no choice but to follow him as he descended some filthy steps to a long underground tunnel, wondering what he was getting himself into. At the bottom of the steps, Dargrin took his ring off and handed it to a young boy who slipped it on and walked back up to the street. "They'll think I'm just wandering around the local market. No monitoring down here, Lieutenant. Church business only. Dangerous if the Royals or the Gwyndlyn find that a Frail has been down here."

Kalik felt his heart racing, his growing fears suddenly confirmed. Rostran did have an illegal underground. Even more interesting, the Church and the ruling party were estranged. He looked up at Dargrin. "I'm Ordinary. Not frail."

Dargrin clasped him on the back. "And so you are. We original humans are an endangered race. And blood is thicker than politics, right?" He turned and led the way down the tunnel, talking over his shoulder as he walked. "There are some things people need to know about Rostran. People who aren't bound to this little planet. People who can talk to other people. People like you."

## Chapter 26

*(Date: 1052-11-02, 17:00 ST)*

"I want you to put us well east of the spaceport," Captain Durgin told the Dropmaster.

The grizzled Sergeant punched in some coordinates, and then looked up at him, his face looking more than a little worried. "Landing point laid in as ordered. But there's mountains and heavy vegetation there, Captain. Jungle-like."

"We can use the cover on our approach to the city," Durgin said grimly. "Maybe stay alive until we find our people." He turned to consider the seven huge men who stood beside him. They were all getting suited up in their drop suits. Kelsorian Marines, part of the ship's security detail. They wore Vendorian body armor with its built-in exoskeleton and integrated weapons. Durgin carried the Klav'en, unfortunately with the battery barely half charged. "You men ready for this?"

"Aye, aye, sir," the Marines chanted together.

They started to climb into, or more correctly put on, miniature Singleton space crafts. Each ship's five-hundred kilo weight was suspended from the ceiling by cables. The ships contained life support, propulsion and armor in a highly maneuverable craft that looked like an oversized spacesuit. Singletons were used both as attack ships for close-in fighting, and also for stealth descents to planets with an M-class atmosphere. They were also used as escape vehicles. They came down fast, the ride brutal, but a highly trained soldier could remain combat effective in them all the way to the ground.

"Looks more like an invasion than a rescue mission," Commander Pestrov said as he watched the team seal up. "You sure you want a bunch of Arions to see you coming down in force?"

"Better to be prepared than to wind up outgunned," the Security Chief, Marine Captain Alejan Barstenal growled. "We'll be in and out before they know what's happening."

Pestrov looked at him doubtfully. He'd read more than his share of technical papers on the Supremis back when he was in the University. He turned to Durgin. "Captain, I think we should negotiate further with the Rostrans before sending a team down. There is no indication that our people are in danger. And these are Arions." What he didn't say was that the Arions were the finest fighting force in the universe. Their skills honed by constant combat. Kelsor, by contrast, had never even fought in a war.

"You aren't briefed on the whole situation. I wish I could spell it out, Dan, but I can't. You just have to trust me."

"Then can I remind you again that you aren't currently qualified in a drop suit?"

"So noted. But it was my decision to send Kalik and Liddell down there, Dan. It's my responsibility to get them back."

"I figured as much." He handed Durgin a section of very fine gold chain. "I gave each member of the security team a spool of this stuff. If you run into any hostile Rostrans, engage using your exoskeleton to increase your strength. It'll make you a whole lot tougher than a Betan. If you have the bad luck to encounter a Prime, use the Sonic Maser first. Their hearing is very acute and it might stun them. If it does, then wrap them in the gold chain. Fast."

"And if we don't manage that?"

Pestrov shrugged. "Then you die. Probably very quickly."

"Simple enough," Durgin quipped, trying to swallow the cold fear that was building inside him.

Pestrov continued. "You've got to get an unbroken link of gold around their body. Neck is best, torso is second best, arms and feet have limited effect but that's better than nothing."

"And the Klav'en?"

"In case the Sonic and gold technique fails. It might work."

"Might? This thing could vaporize our ship."

"Primes are pretty good at shrugging off heat and energy. They live on the stuff. A short burst will disable them momentarily, but they'll just absorb the energy and be even stronger and more energetic a few minutes later."

Durgin nodded as he remembered Alisa's otherworldly demo in the loading bay when she first came on board.

"If you absolutely have to use it, you've got to kill them with your first shot. Ten second burst at the minimum. Maybe a lot more. Keep firing until you're out of power. Same goes for the plasma emitters in your armor."

"Simple enough," Durgin said as he finished fastening his armor.

Pestrov reached out to clasp his friend's shoulder. The skintight armor made him feel like a man of steel. "Peter, no Kelsorian has ever engaged a Prime in all our history. We've learned what little we know from the records of worlds that have fought back against the Arions." He paused for a long moment. "Unless there was a large Velorian presence to even the odds, all those worlds fell to the Arions."

"Understood, Dan."

"Lastly, just for the record, if your team engages a solitary Prime, you should expect to take eighty percent casualties in the first five minutes. Even with all this gear and weapons. If there is more than one of them... well, we don't need to do that math."

Durgin looked up into the worried face of his friend. "Then you should know that this is a matter of life and death for Liddell and Kalik, Dan. If I don't make it back, you'll have to bring word to Admiral Tso. He'll explain."

"Then good hunting, Captain. I sure wouldn't want to be in your shoes, dropping in on a planet of Arions and all."

"They have no more love for the Empire than for the Enlightenment," Durgin replied. "We're part of neither. As far as Culture can determine, their society is devoted to peaceful isolation. Pretty similar to Kelsor in some ways."

Dan smiled at his old friend. "A matriarchy with a bunch of ex-Arion femmes running the show? Xenophobic to boot. Many of them Primes. Yeah, that sounds like peaceful isolation."

Durgin looked at the men. The Marines looked determined, almost happy, the look of men who were finally going to fulfill the promise of their long training. The rest of the crew looked grim and worried. "O.K. Last chance. Anyone else want to join us for a little shore leave?" he quipped, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

The Dropmaster stiffened to attention. "No, Sir, thank you, Sir."

Durgin held his thumb up as he looked at the Marines. He got thumbs ups in reply. "O.K. Let's go, Lieutenant. Drop us when we're in range."

"Soon as we get a break in the flares," the Dropmaster replied.

The rest of the men relaxed slightly, hanging from the ceiling like bats. Durgin nervously pressed the Enable button to power up his propulsion unit. A tiny antigrav turbine began to whine inside his backpack. He began to check out the unfamiliar systems of his suit.

## Chapter 27

*(Date: 1052-11-02, 16:30 ST)*

"We've got a window, Captain. Radiation's out of the red zone but just barely. I hope nobody here was planning on having any more kids."

The Marines looked at Lieutenant Pestrov as if he was deranged. They were professionals. They'd all deposited sperm back in the cryobank on Kels78or before leaving on such a dangerous mission. In any case, most of their relationships with women were the kind that sailors had made infamous for thousands of years on every world. An exchange of goods.

"Just get us the hell down there Dan."

"Right, Captain. We've got a window coming up fast, but it's brief. A new prominence is flaring in the photosphere. We've got barely twelve minutes before the hard radiation gets here."

"Time enough. Let's go." Durgin snapped the nosepiece of his Singleton suit closed. The track overhead began to move, cycling Durgin and the Marines into the long airlock. They hung like sides of meat on the rack, their 500kg suits supported by a detachable cable. The door closed behind them.

"Partial venting. Check your suits," the radio link crackled. The pressure dropped by three-hundred millibars. The Marines checked in, reporting that their suits were holding pressure.

"We're clear," Durgin declared. "Drop on your signal."

"Roger," the Dropmaster replied as he dumped the rest of the pressure. "Edge of the entry window coming up in twenty."

Durgin closed his eyes, only to see Alisa's face again. He barely heard the Jumpmaster counting down. At the ten count, the floor snapped open to reveal the brilliantly blue planet below. Being a water world, it looked surprisingly like pictures he'd seen of Earth. Very different than the red and purple shades of Kelsor. The count went to zero, and the jets on his suit puffed to send him drifting down and out of the bay. He looked up to see the other Singletons arranged in a perfectly straight line. A good drop.

He glanced up into the corner of his vision and activated the command link. He focused on the Atmospheric Entry menu, and the sensor followed his eye's focal point. Pulling down the menu, he selected Combat Profile. That was the fastest way to the surface. Also the most brutal.

"Combat entry on my command," he said. "3,2,1..." He stared at the Execute icon, and the jets puffed to rotate him, pointing the back of the suit toward the atmosphere below. The G's slammed into his back as the antigrav spun rapidly to slow them below orbital velocity. The Singletons sensed each other's positions and maneuvered far enough apart to maintain safe separation on the way down.

Durgin felt the first brush against the atmosphere three minutes later. They were coming down very fast. He prayed that Dan had programmed the atmospheric parameters correctly. If they were off even 2% on the density, they'd burn up during a maximum rate descent.

The G's built rapidly, averaging 6.5 with brief adjustments that pushed them to 8.2 for a few moments. He clenched his Kegel muscles as he struggled to breathe, tensing his lower body to try to keep enough blood in his brain. His vision shrank down to a tunnel as the G's briefly rose to 10 during the peak atmospheric stress.

And suddenly they were through the worst of it. The suits rotated forward as stubby wings snapped out of their backpacks. Durgin squinted at the display to activate Atmospheric Controls. Tactile sensors in his fingertips now controlled his flight. His small contingent of soldiers dove toward the lush jungle fifteen miles below at Mach 10.

## Chapter 28

*(Date: 1052-11-02, 16:35 ST)*

Alisa glanced up at the sky as they walked across a courtyard, hoping to catch sight of Lara. She was disappointed when she saw only unbroken blue. Talak led the way through a two-story tall doorway that opened into a gigantic inner room. The marble floor was eighty meters in diameter, and the room was octagonal in shape with a door centered in each side. The tower rose a hundred stories over her head, with hundreds of large windows ringing it and a jungle of hanging plants bright with yellow flowers filing the center. It was immense. "Nice little entranceway," she said in awe.

"This is Lara's favorite tower," Talak nodded. "She likes the yellow flowers. He pointed toward the third door from the right. "That's where you'll find Layla."

Alisa walked toward it, only to hear the ring of metal from behind the door. It sounded like a very intense sword duel. She paused to look questioningly back at Talak.

"Just Layla and Mother working out. Go inside and stand by the door until one of them acknowledges you."

"You aren't going in?"

"Nope. The second night of the Conjugational is for Gwyndylyn only." He winked at Alisa as he turned around to head back toward the outer door. "It's a woman's world, after all."

"And a very weird one," Alisa whispered to herself. She was still thinking of Lara, living among all these xenophobic Primes. She must have been kidnapped from one of the Enlightenment worlds. But by whom? Talak claimed they'd had no contacts with the outside world for decades, yet the girl looked barely ten. Traders? But no trader could have kidnapped a Velorian away from her parents, let alone brought her to Rostran to sell.

Alisa sighed in frustration. Whatever Lara's origin, she was fully empowered and seemingly content to live here. Probably raised here from a very young age. And then there was that comment about her being stronger than the other girls. A Velorian should not have been as strong as a Prime, not even a P1 was, at least before her Rites. And those enlarged eyes? What was it that her mother Naomi had said about a special class of Protectors. P0's or something? Some name like Sarya'yen?

Alisa tried to open the door, only to discover a massive steel handle that was seemingly locked. No, not locked, she decided as she tested it, just very difficult to open. She twisted the handle with ten times a human's strength, and leaned her shoulder against the heavy door. It swung ponderously open on oiled hinges.

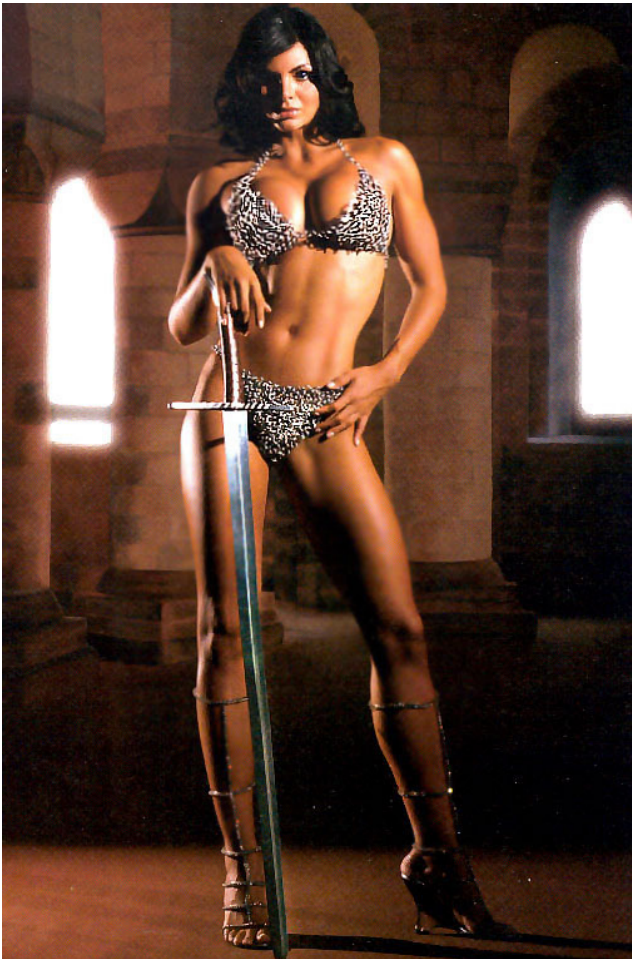
She slipped through the opening to find herself in another oversized room. Except in this case, the floor was wooden, not marble, and scuffed up like an over-used dance hall. Small windows lined the room, and stone columns rose to



support a domed ceiling of four-story height. Racks of huge broadswords covered one wall.

A section of the room curved off into an L shape, and that was where the ring of steel was coming from. Alisa walked along the inside wall until she could see around the corner. Two women were fighting with swords as long as their bodies. One woman was Alisa's height and dressed in a loose black cloak, her head covered with a tightly fitting hood, her face hidden by its shadow, an aquamarine flash of blue visible in its depths. The other woman was wearing just a chain mail bikini and metallic high heels, the straps wrapping around her calves. She was strikingly tall -- easily 2.2 meters.

The fighting was intense, with sparks flying from the long blades on every crashing impact, yet the heavy swords flashed around as if they were weightless. The cloaked woman was clearly quicker, and she managed to find a way through the taller woman's defenses. She delivered a powerful stabbing thrust that caught her opponent just under the ribs to sent her flying backward. She crashed against the far wall, gripping her stomach. The blow should have cut the woman in half, but when she lowered her hand, there wasn't a mark on her skin. She scrambled back to her feet to rest her sword tip on the floor, leaning on it. She turned to look toward Alisa, her eyes as sharp as blue lasers.



"So, you are the woman my conjugal mate is so impressed with," she said, a note of challenge clear in her voice. "I had expected him to come home in need of my loving skills after being teased by the delicacy of a Frail."

"Layla, be polite," the cloaked woman warned.

"You haven't answered my question," Layla snapped at Alisa, the arrogance clear in her voice. "You can speak freely here. There are no men present."

"We haven't been introduced," Alisa replied. "I am told that an introduction is required before speaking to you."

Layla laughed. "Were you introduced to the Prince before you took him to your bed?"

"Yes. He is a man of honor."

She laughed again. "I guess he's enough of a man to do the job when he has to. Barely."

Alisa felt herself growing angry. Like with Marla, she felt an immediate dislike for Layla. Especially now that she was talking about Talak as if their coming Congugational was some kind of arrangement. A chore even.

Layla's eyes narrowed as she saw the angry look in Alisa's. "You like him don't you, little one? You've fallen in love with my man simply because he can put stars in the eyes of an enhanced human. How pitiful you Frails are."

The cloaked woman finished oiling her sword and put it away. "Don't underestimate Talak, Layla. He's the finest *kella'prime* we've ever produced. You have to be with child before the Equinox. Goddess knows that too few Gwyndlyn children have been born these last years." She talked as if Alisa wasn't even in the room.

"Is that why you have a Velorian girl living among you?" Alisa asked without thinking.

The cloaked woman paused, her face still hidden by her robe.

Layla's eyes grew dangerously bright as she glared at Alisa, sending a blistering wave of heat washing over her. Layla raised her sword and stepped forward.

Alisa tossed her hair over her shoulder and glared up into Layla's dangerous eyes, bravely holding her ground. Layla swung the sword toward Alisa's neck with enough force to take a Betan's head off, but Alisa ducked under it at the last moment. With Layla momentarily off balance and over confident, Alisa reacted by instinct alone as she threw herself forward to tackle her. She barely had the presence of mind to feign weakness. Strength is what she really wanted to use. Strength to pound Layla to a pulp.

Layla spun around to scramble back to her feet, the delivering a kick to Alisa's midriff. She flew across the room to land in the middle of the floor. She lay still for a half second, and then leaped back to her feet like a warrior, her fists clenched.

Alisa barely caught herself. What was she doing? Challenging a Prime? The last time she did that, back on Reigel, she'd nearly been killed. She spun

around to stare at the door, taking some deep breaths as she struggled to get her emotions back under control. Being around all these Primes was making her blood boil. Old instincts were emerging, ones that had been baked into the race she told herself, but it didn't help. The only thing she knew for sure was that she couldn't show any fear. Arions had a predator's instinct for preying on weakness. She stood as tall as she could as she turned back and walked over to stand in front of Layla.

Layla's eyes were still burning, but Alisa proudly knew that a burst of heat vision would cause her no injury. She stared up at Layla as she felt the tension between them rising. Then, just when she thought Layla was going to lash out with her eyes, or she with hers, the tall woman laughed and turned back toward her sparring partner. "She is gutsy and brave, I'll give your human that. Very enhanced too."

"She's not my human," the cloaked woman replied. "The Senator was the one who convinced the Kelsorians to send her down here."

Alisa's thoughts raced as she listened to her words. Wasn't this all Durgin's game gone out of control?

Layla turned back to offer Alisa her hand. "I am Princess Layla Emi'la Zarin'dar. And you must be Lieutenant Alisa Liddell of the starship *Anders Flame*."

"I'm afraid I'm only an Ensign," Alisa said as she took her hand. Layla's grip kept tightening until Alisa squinted her eyes and pretended to be in pain. It wasn't much of an act. Layla was enormously strong.

"Very impressive enhancement," Layla said as she released her hand. "My grip should have crushed a Frail's hand a dozen times over. As Talak said, your enhancement is unusual. Are you a warrior, Alisa?"

Alisa flexed her hand, feigning being in pain. "No, just a science officer."

"Just a science officer?" Layla laughed coldly again. "Do you realize that of all the assets our world needs, scientists are the most important? Look around you. We have plenty of warriors."

Alisa felt the now familiar cold chill come over her again. She was very aware that there were several hundred Primes within the walls and grounds of *Rivera*. And that she was facing the most dangerous warrior on the planet, someone who had just challenged her native invulnerability. This had to be the most singularly dangerous place in the universe for a Velorian to be standing. She swallowed her fear and continued to look determinedly up at Layla as she towered over her.

"So, little one. Tell me about yourself. How did you come to be so foolish as to try to turn my man's head? And so strong and so fearless as to challenge me."

Alisa's mouth was dry when she tried to speak. "His name is Talak. And he's still your man, Layla. My night with him was by your arrangement."

Layla smiled as she handed Alisa her sword. "Yes, of course it was. I wanted to give you but a taste of the joys of being a Gwyndlyn. I just hadn't intended

for Talak to enjoy it so." She lifted another huge sword off its rack. "Defend yourself, Alisa."

"Layla, Layla," the other woman said with a shake of her head. "Don't embarrass the poor dear." She walked over to take the smaller sword from Alisa's hands. "Don't let my young apprentice frighten you. She's in the grip of *dala'kar*, and that is making her into a real bitch. Isn't it dear?"

Layla said nothing as she turned her back to begin practicing a complex series of moves.

"So, are you the one everyone calls Mother?" Alisa asked the hooded woman.

"I am. Do you know who or what I am?"

"A Gwyndlyn, of course."

The woman shook her head. "They are all descended from the dozen Primal women who settled this world. I was born under a far more dangerous star."

Alisa felt her sense of dread growing even greater. If Mother wasn't Primal, what was she? There was only one thing worse, and she refused to think of that.

"I was given the name Tala, but have been called *Drak'an'alar* by the Galen. The Destroyer of Worlds." She lowered her voice, almost whispering. "There are some who say that I'm the deadliest being who has ever lived."

Alisa couldn't help but laugh at her words, her eyes sparking inside the darkness of her hood. "Other than the Galen, of course. Some still debate whether that's an honor or a curse."

Alisa's heart froze further in fear, yet she still refused to say the word that was forming in her mind. The woman saw the question in Alisa's eyes and smiled. "You know what I am, but you fear to say the word."

"I don't know any..." Alisa started to say, only to have the woman pull back the hood of her cloak. Alisa gasped as her worst fears were confirmed. The deadliest eyes in the universe stared back at her.

Unnaturally large and glowing aquamarine blue in color, irises multifaceted like cut diamonds, the corneas as clear as a child's.

Alisa gasped in horror as she recognized them for what they were.

The eyes of a Tset'lar!



## Chapter 29

*(Date: 1052-11-02, 17:00 ST)*

Alisa's heart raced painfully in her chest, and she took an involuntary step back, unable to control her fear. She'd long heard the horror stories of the Tset'lar. How they could vaporize a mighty starship with a single flash of those eyes, and how they killed Protectors nearly as easily. How a dozen of them had destroyed an entire planet with just their heated stares.

Tala's face was impassive as she turned to Layla. "Would you excuse us, my daughter?"

Layla finished a few more moves of her ritual combat, only to pause as she saw that Tala had lowered her hood. "I thought you said she wasn't your human? Yet you show her..."

"Layla!" Tala stopped her, a warning note in her voice.

Layla glared at Alisa a final time before wracking her sword and stalking from the room. She opened and closed the massive door as if it was weightless.

Tala's eyes returned to Alisa. "Why do you wear a covering over your hair, my child."

"What... what are you talking about?"

Tala smiled. "There are too few tachyons in this system for most others to see with. But not mine."

Alisa's thoughts raced, looking for an escape. Her physical abilities, even without gold, were useless here. If a trained Prime could defeat her, then Tala was ten times more lethal. Tset'lars were killing machines aimed at Velorians. Except that Lara was here, and apparently favored by Tala. "The girl. Lara. She's some kind of Velorian, yet you accept her among you."

"She is not what she seems."

"But she isn't Arion."

"Something both you and the Church agree on. It was very difficult for the sisters to accept her at first. But she has grown up in our culture. She knows only the Gwyndlyn way."

"And if another should come? Not a child."

Tala's smile dimmed. "So we come back to the reason why Talak was so impressed with you. I should have deduced that earlier. Only a Velorian could turn such a man's head."

Alisa struggled to tear her eyes from the mesmerizing blue of Tala's. She wet her lips, trying to calm her racing heart, knowing she couldn't show fear. "Then why am I still alive?"

Tala smiled. "You are strong, Alisa. You control your fear. I respect that. Even I couldn't have trained you better."

Alisa said nothing. If Tala wanted to kill her, there was nothing she could do to stop her.

"I've killed a dozen Protectors, Alisa," she said as if to answer her thoughts. "Two of them Viragos. Some I've torn apart with my bare hands, but most I've destroyed with my eyes. Why you are here?"

"I'm not a Protector."

"But you were born to be one. That much is clear from your genetics."

"The story is complicated."

"I have the time to listen. But why don't we start by discarding that silly hairpiece."

Alisa took a deep breath and reached up to press the two spots on the side of her hairpiece. The molecular bond to her hair relaxed. She pulled it off and shook her head, blonde tresses falling over her shoulders. She turned to look fearfully into Tala's eyes.





"I understand now why Talak was taken with you," Tala said, resting her chin on her hand. "You are a beautiful young woman. Does he know your secret?"

"No. He thinks I'm just an enhanced human."

"Few would guess that one of their so-called Heathens would walk among them. But you are a disruptive force here, Alisa. Coming between Layla and Talak."

"He doesn't love Layla. Nor she him."

Tala smiled. "Don't judge the motives of people you don't understand, and I will afford you the same honor. I have read that no P1 can escape the Rites. That you hunt my sisters, killing them when you can."

Alisa opened her mouth, but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth it was so dry. Tala handed her a bottle of water. Alisa drank it in a single long draught. She wet her lips with her tongue. "I'm what I said before. A science officer on the Kelsorian vessel."

"Do they know your true self?"

Alisa shook her head. "The Captain and ship's physician do. No one else."

"Not even your companion?"

"He suspects."

"Better he doesn't know. Not while he's on Rostran." She turned her back to Alisa and looked out the window. "So, we have a bit of a problem to solve here, Alisa. You and I."

Alisa want to run, to fly, to get away any way she could. She clenched her fists, considering the ways to hit Tala hard enough to put her down, and then fly out the window. If she accelerated as hard as she could, she could be in free space in less than a minute. But what then? Returning to the *Flame* would only ensure its destruction. Tala could remove it from existence with a mere glance. And if she kept going on her own, then she would have to either penetrate the wormhole again, without any beacons on this side, a suicide mission. The other option was to keep going deeper into this sector. But where? The stars here were uncharted. And what about Kalik? Leave him here to die at Layla's hands? No, she wasn't going to abandon her friend.

Tala stood quietly beside her. "Have you finished working out the odds of attacking me and escaping, Alisa?"

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Good. I'm glad we got past that moment." Tala turned back to face her. "You wouldn't have made it anyway."

"That wasn't the reason. I was worried about Kalik." She turned to face Tala. "And how did you know what I was thinking?"

"We are both warriors born, Alisa, even if you are not trained as one. Our minds work the same. It's what I would have been thinking. Working the angles, the odds."

"The Velorian girl. Lara. That's why I'm still alive, isn't it? You need something from me."

Tala laughed. "Is that what she told you she is?"

"But what else? Certainly not Arion."

"Perhaps you will learn the truth in time. If I grant you any." Tala paused to let her ominous words sink in.

"You don't need to threaten me," Alisa glowered. "I'm not stupid."

"Then you have to be brave."

"There are things in the universe I can't change, Tala. You standing there, me standing here. Our birthrights. If I'm going to die, then tell me now."

"Spoken like a true Protector." Tala turned to pace the floor. Several minutes passed before she spoke again. "I will say that Lara seems drawn to you, as witnessed by her little spectacle on your balcony. She isn't friendly toward the other sisters, only to the younger children."

"You watched that?"

Tala nodded.

"Then you know how Lara got here. Where she's from."

"And here I thought your first question would be your own fate."



"You will decide that, one way or the other," Alisa said slowly, her fears at least partially under control now. "The girl, on the other hand, is an innocent. She knows about her own people's history as well as the Gwyndlyn's. She's reading up on Terrans. And Velorians. She's very bright. She has to make some choices."

"And you are an academic, Alisa. Holder of advanced degrees if the brag sheet your ship provided is correct. You could teach her things that we could not. She was born to greater things than this."

"Is she Saray'en?" Alisa asked, remembering the name. They were a special kind of Protector that had been created specifically to restore the balance of power against the Tset'lar. "And if so, she could destroy you as easily as you could me."

"She is clearly capable of that. But for different reasons than you guessed."

Alisa felt a ray of hope. "But not on this world of peace," she offered daringly.

Tala's eyebrow lifted. "You learn fast. We have indeed rejected the war, the hatred. But not our willingness to keep it from reaching our planet again. The truth of Rostran can never travel outside this system."

"Then my ship can't leave?"

"They are free to go, for they know nothing of our true nature. But not you or your companion."

"What about the others of my crew. They are probably coming down, thinking they are going to save me."

"As fools often do. They cannot communicate with their ship. I've decided to make them a test for Lara. She will have to make choices regarding the protection of our heritage."

"You know I must help them."

Tala shook her head. "That I will not permit. Only Lara can decide their fate now. She will begin to learn."

## Chapter 30

*(Date: 1052-11-02, 17:30 ST)*

"We've got seven ravens descending," the Rostran Planetary Defense technician said into his mike. Raven was the name for an unidentified vehicle. "Backtrack shows them coming from the Kelsorian ship."

"Roger. Standby."

A loud tone sounded in the Duty Office at *Rivera* a few seconds later.

"Keri Zam'rel here," the young woman on duty replied in a bored voice. She was lounging in her chair reading one of the ancient paper books that she so enjoyed. She was dressed in the red uniform of a Guardian.

"The Kelsorians are sending an unauthorized contingent down. Small ships, probably singles, coming in on a combat profile. Looks like they're going to ground in Sector Five."

"Right," she said as she slowly put her book away. More exercises. Always more exercises. Nobody would be stupid enough to violate their airspace without permission. The last who tried, a Scalantran trader coming in with some illegal drugs, hadn't lived five minutes after his feet touched Rostran soil. He'd been Keri's first, and so far only, kill. Her bare hands against a Vendorian needle gun. The Scalantran hadn't stood a chance.

"This is not an exercise. Repeat, not an exercise."

Keri sat up straight in her chair, her heart leaping. Not an exercise? She pressed her throat mike. "Seven of them did you say?"

"Affirmative. Five minutes from touchdown."

"Shit!" Keri launched herself out of her seat and ran toward the launch pad, moving at many times human speed. It would take her seven minutes to get to Sector Five in a StreamJet, the fastest of the flitters. Protocol called for taking invaders out before they reached the ground. She was already late.

She pressed her throat mike to her skin. "I need a direct link to Mother," she shouted as she ran. The computer beeped softly as it worked on the connection. Keri dove through the door of the flitter and slammed her palm down on the Launch button. The flitter, prepped for a maximum effort launch, fairly exploded off the ground at 20 G's acceleration. The piercing scream of its antigrav straining in overload forced everyone to cover their ears as it raced low over the castle to race toward the horizon.

"This is Tala. What's the problem, Keri?"

"Seven intruders, Kelsorian's apparently, coming down in Sector Five. I'm airborne, but have no info on their weapons or intentions. I need backup."

The ground flashed beneath Keri as she went. She was traveling at Mach 3 only seconds later, still flying below the canyon walls as she climbed toward the snowy summits.

Tala touched her throat mike. "They were expected, Keri, but not welcome. You know your duty."

"I understand," Keri said crisply.

Tala reached out to touch the sensor pad on the table in front of her. "Locate Lara."

The top of the table began to glow, an image of Lara appearing. She was curled up in a corner of the huge library reading a book on Terran history.

"Lara, I've got a mission for you. Your most important one ever."

Keri blasted over the snowy summits only seconds later. She rolled the flitter on its back to pull hard toward the ground, trying to hug the terrain as she descended dizzily down the eastern flank of the mountains. She wasn't sure what kind of sensors the intruders had, and staying close to the ground was the best way to maintain an element of surprise. That and racing out of the setting sun to hopefully confuse their visual sensors.

She roared only meters above the trees, the flitter's shockwave sending a violent swirl of leaves and broken limbs rising in her wake. She glanced at her watch. Four minutes since launch. The intruders were almost to the ground.

Another voice crackled in her ear. "Keri, this is Tanja, I got the same call. I'm coming from East Station. ETA one minute."

"Glad to have you with me, sister," Keri grinned determinedly. She unconsciously pushed on the already pegged throttle, bending the lever slightly as she urged her flitter to fly faster. She dropped down a few more meters, daringly trying to ride the reflected shock wave from the ground. The ship was shaking violently but it skipped ahead faster yet.

"Is this capture only or are we sanctioned?" Tanja asked.

"Threat unknown. We decide based on their armament and actions."

"Affirmative."

## Chapter 31

*(Date: 1052-11-02, 17:35 ST)*

Durgin was the last to land. He hit hard, his rustiness in a Singleton showing as he dug a groove across the clearing to crash into a tree. He quickly popped the seals and crawled from the oversized suit, none the worse except for some bruises. The other Singletons lay scattered around the small clearing, looking like the cast off pods from some kind of metamorphosis. The men's polished exoskeletons gleamed in the waning sunlight, making them look more like sleek robots than humans. The body armor tightly covered all but their faces, which was in turn protected by a transparent forcefield.

The armor amplified the wearer's strength by virtue of powerful actuators in the joints that were slaved to their muscular nerve impulses. They sensed the strain, and when human strength began to reach its limit, the actuators kicked in. A transparent force field was channeled across a microscopic array of flush mounted antennas that made up the outer layer of the armor. The combination of metallurgy and energy field technologies made them tremendously strong and agile. The Vendorians they'd bought these from had claimed a wearer could take on a Prime and survive long enough to get help. Durgin personally doubted that. He'd seen a little of what Alisa was capable of, and she wasn't as powerful as a Prime.

Numerous weapons were fitted to the men's arms and hands. The primary was a K11 projectile gun that fired an explosive bullet. Also an L7, a miniaturized version of the old Arion GAR, a directed energy weapon using charged particles. The most unique weapon was a Sonic, a type of maser that destroyed its target with coherent sound waves. Using a feedback mechanism, it would tune itself to the resonant frequency of nearly any type of structure, and then narrow the maser's emissions to a quarter octave on either side of the resonant frequency. The reinforcing shock waves would cause the target to shatter itself apart. While generally used against inorganic targets, it was reputedly capable of turning human bones to dust while leaving flesh largely unharmed. An ugly way to die, Durgin decided.

The men started to fan out into a loose perimeter. They were nearly to the edge of the clearing when a two small craft flashed over the clearing from opposite directions, traveling at high Mach. Their shockwaves lashed at the men like a whip, knocking two off their feet. The ships were gone before anyone could identify them.

The Marines looked back at Durgin with wide open eyes, but like good soldiers, they said nothing. Their ECN systems had detected emissions from the Rostran scanners on the way down.

"At least we don't have to wonder if they saw us coming," Durgin said softly to the Marine Captain. "We have to move fast now. They'll be expecting human mobility."

"Intel says that most of the locals are Betans, Captain," Alejan reminded him, "but we gotta be ready for anything." He looked at the display on his wrist. "Let's get under cover in the bush. Heading to the city is 120 degrees. Hundred meter spacing. Terrain's rough, but I want travel at 40 klicks an hour." He flashed hand signals to his men.

Corporal Nevil Rafish struck out furthest to the north. Crouching low under the tree branches, he ran up a small stream into the forest. His Heads-Up Reticle showed the positions and status of the other men. They were close enough to support each other if necessary, but far enough apart to not be taken out with a single weapon burst.

He was two klicks from the edge of the clearing when he spotted movement. He threw himself against the side of the ravine as he whispered into his mike. "Bogey. Eighty meters ahead my position."

"Roger. Closing from the flank," Corporal Jim Krupps whispered back. Standard combat doctrine involving contact with potentially hostile aliens was to have one member confront the alien while another targeted them obliquely from the rear quarter.

Rafish wasn't sure what weapon to deploy. If facing an unprotected Betan, the K11 was lethal. The L7 was needed if they wore armor -- the particle beam would melt through nearly anything, but its power cell was only good for a few minutes. He prayed he wasn't facing a Prime. The sonic blaster and gold were an untried combination. Tactically a disaster unless at least two soldiers engaged simultaneously.

He cautiously crept along the wall of the ravine, then climbed out of the stream to use the cover of the huge trees. The Rostran continued to approach down the stream, moving slowly and cautiously. It was a young woman, tall and very thin, wearing some kind of uniform. He was shocked to see that her skin was a rich chocolate brown, her hair jet-black and lustrous. She looked Terra-African in origin. He breathed a sigh of relief. Not just from meeting a woman of his own race.

He studied her closer. She didn't appear to be armed, but she was definitely searching for something. He stayed hidden behind a large tree to give Krupps a chance to close from the flank. He keyed his throat mike again to whisper. "Terra-African woman, a real looker, Krupps. Forty meters in front of my position now. Working her way down the stream bed. Gotta be human."

"Affirmative." Krupps never said much of anything, but he was just the man to have at your side in a fight. "I'm almost in position. Behind her and above."

Rafish counted to ten to give Krupps a chance to close further, and then took a deep breath and slipped around the tree to face her. She looked up at him, clearly startled to see him facing her. She wore a short white leather skirt and halter-top adorned with a fashionably raised collar. Her midriff was tantalizingly bare and startlingly defined. Her hair was short and glistening with highlights. She had incredible legs, long yet wickedly powerful, and her face was stunningly beautiful.



He stared back at her in awe as he tried to comprehend how a woman could be so slender and so well-muscled at the same time. She was so different than what he'd feared that he lowered his weapon and smiled at her. His earpiece crackled at the same time. "Krupps here. I got a sonic bounce off the alien with my maser." He sounded excited. "Very dense body type. Not human. I repeat, not human. Likely Primal."

Rafish's mouth fell open. "There... there are no black Primes," he said softly into his mike. He wasn't sure if his words were a wish or a prayer. Then a glint of fading sunlight caught her eyes, and he saw blue. He'd never heard of a Terra-African with blue eyes.

She smiled faintly as she saw the change in his expression, and then, in a blink of an eye, she was gone.

Rafish looked around, disbelieving both Krupps' warning and the fact that she'd moved that fast. Then a scream came from his right to snap him back to reality.

Krupps!

Rafish took off running, his exoskeleton enabling him to crash through the heavy brush, mowing down the numerous small saplings that blocked his way. He emerged seconds later into a small clearing. The woman was kneeling over

Krupps as he lay on his back. He had his L7 pressed against her forehead and his K11 jammed into her bare stomach. She was holding her arms out at her sides, clearly trying to look less hostile. Rafish glanced down to see her muscular legs tensing, her knees pressing against Krupps' hips. Assuming she was indeed a Prime, Krupps was in mortal danger.

Rafish fumbled with his weapons before coming up with his Sonic. He felt around for the spool of gold chain in his side pocket while punching up the pre-programmed sonic frequency for a Prime. He prayed the settings they'd bought from the Scalantran weapons traders were correct. Supposedly they would enable the Sonic to incapacitate a Prime without injuring a human due to the radically different density of their bones.

"Stand up slowly," Rafish growled behind the woman's back.

"He was preparing to fire on me," the woman said in strongly accented English, one of the three languages from old Earth that were still spoken. The Nordic gutturals suggested she'd been raised among the Arions, but that made no sense considering her skin color.

"She's a fucking Prime," Krupps grunted as he tried to push her away with the barrel of his K11. His enormously amplified strength bent the weapon against her forehead, but she didn't move. "Legs are strong as hell. Exoskeleton is barely holding out."

Rafish looked down to see her hard muscles tensing as she held him down, resisting both his amplified strength. A shimmer surrounded the middle of Krupps' body as the forcefield flared in an attempt to reinforce the Vendorian steel. The Vendorians had said it would stand up to a Prime, but none of them had hoped to put that claim to the test so quickly.

"I'm lowering my weapons," Rafish said loudly. "Don't hurt him." He set his Sonic down.

The woman relaxed her grip on Krupps and rose slowly to her feet, her fingers digging into Krupps' chest armor to lift him with her, his forcefield flaring brightly where she gripped him. She held him as if he was weightless for a long moment before setting his feet back on the ground. Krupps quickly limped away, clutching his chest, his eyes wide. His armor showed two stress-wrinkled depressions where her knees had been pressing.

She tilted her head to stare curiously at Rafish, apparently intrigued by his skin color. "I'm of the Gwyndylyn *salon*. A Guardian. Who are you?" She talked as if Rafish was supposed to know what that meant. She walked closer, circling him, studying him.

Rafish stood at attention, every muscle in his body tensed for battle.

"I've never met anyone else with my coloration before," she continued. "What is your genetic track?"

"Human," Rafish said through gritted teeth. Having a Prime standing this close was his worst nightmare. The gold spool started to burn in his pocket.

"Obviously, since you need this armor and forcefield to face a woman of the Order. But I asked your genetic track."

"The Alecan sect of Kelsor. Terra-African before that." It wasn't exactly name-rank-serial number, and definitely non-regulation, but the woman both terrified and intrigued him at the same time. Rafish had been professionally interested in Primes for a long time, secretly admiring their incredible strength and toughness, the ultimate warriors, but he hadn't given much thought to what a female Prime would be like. He felt a dangerous thrill racing through his body as he inhaled the honey sweetness that surrounded her, his fear strangely turning into dangerous desire. She represented beautiful death. The perfect warrior. The ultimate woman. And so beautifully African as well.

She paused in front of him to look into his eyes for a long moment, her lips tilting into a smile that was so beautiful that he felt his heart melting. Her eyes sparkled crystalline blue and her teeth were china white. "So, we share a few bits of a common ancestral gene pool. That alone has bought you and your friend a few moments of life. Tell me what you're doing on my planet and I'll decide if your answer buys you more."

## Chapter 32

*(Date: 1052-11-02, 17:55 ST)*

Keri wasn't doing as well as Tanja. Being that she was born Primal, every gene perfected by the Galen and not merely an enhanced human like Tanja, her approach was arrogant and direct. Proud of her invulnerability, she hoped to rely on intimidation to capture the men. No human in their right mind would deliberately fight a Gwyndlyn.





The Marines unfortunately had heard Krupps' scream, and they'd seen his vitals and pain index go through the roof. Their fingers were twitching on their triggers when Keri appeared in front of them. Their inexperience in combat and their fears became their undoing. No Kelsorian had fought an Arion in all of history. They stared into her inhumanly blue eyes and opened fire.

The explosive bullets exploded against Keri's body in a blinding blaze of sparks, the impact blasting her fifty meters backward to crash into the branches of a tree. She shook off the blow as she dropped lithely back to the ground, her red uniform peppered with holes, her skin stinging but unharmed from the impacts. She began to approach the soldiers again, relieved that their weapons couldn't injure her. That's when a second soldier open fire with what looked like a GAR. She saw the pre-charge flash just in time to duck under the beam. It struck the Mangral tree behind her, slicing through two meters of wet wood. The massive trunk toppled to flatten her to the ground.

Both soldiers opened fire with their L7's now, the actinic beams blasting portions of the two-meter thick hardwood trunk into smoking splinters, and half melting the gravelly soil beneath her, trying to reach her body beneath the fallen tree. The violent heating caused the sap to explode like a bomb.

Keri dug her fingers into what was left of the thick trunk and rose back to her feet, balancing ten tons of wet wood over her head. She tossed it at the closest Marine, and the massive blow pinned him against another tree, his force field flaring around his body to save his life. The other soldier started firing again, a GAR burst catching Keri's left hip to burn away one side of her uniform and leave her skin glowing white-hot. She ducked low, picking up a hand-sized stone to throw it hard at the soldier. The impact hit his chest like a cannon shell, sending his body crashing backward through the trees to disappear.

The first Marine was back on his feet now, firing back with everything he had. The impact of explosive shells and GAR fire knocked Keri off her feet, stripping the remnants of her uniform away as the heat threatened to scorch her skin. He kept firing at her as she lay on the ground, her body flinching a dozen times a second from the impacts.

Keri balled herself up as she tried to clear her head. The stinging bullets hurt and the GAR burned like fire against her back, yet the soldier just kept firing. She took a deep breath and leaped high into the air, bouncing from tree trunk to tree trunk in a lightning fast circle until she dropped back down to land on the soldier's shoulders. She squeezed his head between her legs hard enough to finish him off, only to feel a strange buzzing sensation that pushed back against her legs. She gasped as the buzz sent a wickedly arousing buzzing tingle through her body.

Force-field enhanced armor, tuned to the frequency of Arion pleasure? She'd never heard of such technology. She tried to ignore the urgent buzzing as she crossed her ankles and bit her lip, beginning a contest of raw muscle power against machine power. Supremis genetics versus Vendorian technology, an age-old struggle. The buzzing tingle grew so strong she could hardly breathe. She was shocked to find herself at the very edge of ecstasy, her legs shaking, waves of hot desire racing through her body, her only desire that of ensuring that the buzzing didn't stop. She couldn't help but relax her grip on his head as she closed her eyes and started to give herself up to the pleasures that demanded their release.

"No!" she suddenly screamed. A hot spear of anger flashed through her body, overcoming the seductive buzzing. She was Gwyndlyn, a Guardian, and no man had the right to assault her body this way.

She bit her lip and forced her arousal to turn into strength, pouring that back into her legs. The man gasped as his force field flared hot between her legs. In control of her emotions now, if only barely, she opened her eyes in time to see someone crashing through the underbrush, coming closer. There as no time left to worry about capture. This was survival. She crossed her ankles and tightened her legs as hard as she could, going for the kill. The man screamed as his forcefield flared hot enough to make his hair and skin smoke. She was starting to gag on the stench when the man's head gave off a sickening pop.

That's when her world came apart.

A horrible ripping sound filled the air, the vibrations seemingly tearing at her body like a thousand sharp claws. Not pleasant like before, this buzzing sound dropped her to the ground, writhing in paralyzing pain. The horrible shrieking made her teeth and bones ache as waves of painful sound assaulted her enhanced hearing. Her stomach felt like it was on fire and her heart started to palpitate. Her bones ached horribly as they felt as if they were going to explode. Terrified by the unknown weapon, it was all she could do to crawl toward the soldier. He backed away, holding the weapon on her with one hand as he unreeled handfuls of gold chain with his other.

The soldier had gold. He intended capture her. Maybe kill her if he could. She lifted her head to try to use her heat vision on him, only to have the sound frequency shift just enough to send hot needles of pain through her ears. She covered them to block out the sound, but it didn't help. She opened her eyes and tried to focus on the man, making them hot, but nothing happened. That's when another energy burst hit her from the back.

Her vision started to dim as she struggled to move out of the path of the beams. She barely got to her knees before she tripped over a fallen log and went down hard and fast. The GAR beam from behind passed right over her.

A man screamed. She looked up to see the beam striking the soldier with the sonic device. His shimmering force field sparkled and then shorted out in a blaze of sparks. His armor melted away in seconds, then his clothing caught fire, finally his flesh. She stared at him in horror as the annihilating beam melted the flesh from his bones, leaving his shoulders and waist connected by nothing but a bare skeleton and naked ribs. He topped forward to snap in half, his upper and lower body separated and burning with a greasy black smoke.

Before she could react, the first shooter retargeted her. She turned to face him, the GAR beam hungrily tearing at her invulnerable flesh. She felt her body soaring into accelerated orgone conversion and then beyond, her chest heating far too fast. She rolled to the left and to keep the beam away from her breasts, only to have the weapon track her, the annihilating beam playing across her backside for a long moment. She moved as if in slow motion, her metabolism out of control, struggling to get to her feet. She fell back to her knees as her legs shook too badly to stand. She looked down to see her skin starting to take on a metallic sheen. A clear sign of impending cellular collapse.

The man kept firing, cruelly determined to kill her. The rocks and very soil around her melted from the plasma assault. She saw a feverish vision of her sitting on her mother's lap back in Kiljstaner. She'd told her mother that she wanted to become a Guardian when she was only six. She saw her mother crying as a horrible scream began to vibrate through her body. It was the sound of her invulnerable cells vibrating from the heat, about to tear themselves apart. A tearing sensation exploded inside her chest and everything started to go dark. Then, just as the last flicker of light began to go out, the beam snapped off. Keri, blinked, unsure if she was alive or dead. She lifted her head experimentally. Her muscles still worked. Even then, it took all her strength to pull the tangled hair from her face. She looked up to see Tanja with her arm

wrapped around the shooter's chest, her other hand holding the weapon, its center section crushed in her grip. Her body was a maze of hard muscles from head to toe as she strained against the force field of his exoskeleton. The man's armor flared as his forcefield overloaded and his eyes rolled up in his head. Tanja dropped him limply to the ground before it collapsed. He was coughing blood, two broad depressions from her breasts denting the back of his armor, the imprint of her arm across his chest.

Keri's body shook violently as the heat from her skin was converted into orgone, giving her back her strength. She struggled to her feet, legs still unsteady, only to see a man with dark features like Tanja's appear behind her. She tried to lash out at him with her heat vision, but saw only a dim flash as her overloaded nervous system refused to carry enough energy to her eyes. She blinked the haze away, and saw that one of the man's weapons had been twisted around his wrists to bind him.

Tanja was suddenly standing beside her, steadying her. "Are you O.K, Keri?"  
"Not by much. The GAR... very close thing."

Tanja nodded. "They're animals. Killers." She glanced toward her captive.  
"All but that one."

Keri looked at the black man behind Tanja.

"His name is Rafish. He didn't try to hurt me. I captured one other by jamming the joints of his exoskeleton." Tanja looked down at the injured man at her feet. "This one's dying."

"Let him. He tried to kill me."

"There are several aliens still missing, Keri. We need to find them before dark." Tanja turned questioning to look at Rafish. "Where are they heading?"

He refused to meet her eyes.

Tanja looked back at Keri. "Start a sweep. I'll join you in a moment."

Keri smiled toothily, suddenly relishing a hunt. Her nakedness and high energy load made her feel so primal now, her predator's senses all alert. Her ancestors had long hunted the feral humans, naked and unarmed like she was. She leaped excitedly into the underbrush, her movements cat-like.

Tanja turned back to face Rafish, forcing a smile to her lips. She felt alive in a way she'd never felt before. It was the adrenaline rush of her first real combat experience, one where she'd been the one to save one of Tala's mighty Primes. She looked into Rafish's eyes, tasting some muskiness in the air. There was something far more interesting than fear in his expression.

"She was a Prime?" he asked, seemingly awed.

"And I saved her life," Tanja said proudly.

Rafish looked back into Tanja's eyes, realizing that there was more than simple pride in her statement. He suspected that racial discrimination wasn't as dead on Rostran as it was most elsewhere. The Arions had always been the ultimate racists.

"You are aware that the penalty for landing unauthorized on Rostran is death?"

"We did not intend you any harm," he said as he straightened up, standing at attention. "We're here to find two of our crewmen who came down earlier."

Tanja looked at the weapons that bristled from his combat exoskeleton. "And that's why that other man tried to kill my sister? Because you don't mean any harm?"

"They panicked. No Kelsorian has ever faced a Prime in battle."

"We call ourselves Gwyndlyn. Your weapons were clearly designed to be used on the sisters. The sonic device in particular."

"My companion was just testing your resistance with his Sonic," Rafish lied. "He didn't use it like Patterson did against your friend."

"Nevertheless," Tanja said coldly as she jerked Patterson to his feet in one hand, Krupps in the other. Patterson was still coughing blood. "This one is mortally wounded. It is not right to let him suffer." She looked closely at Krupps. "This other one is not injured badly."

Krupps looked around wildly, struggling to move, but the joints of his armor had been jammed by Tanja's powerful grip. Fortunately, his forcefield was still working, making the surface of the polished metal shimmer.

Patterson struggled weakly in the woman's grip, gasping, "I don't want to die."

"But you are," Tanja said simply. "I will help make it faster." She reached up to wrap her arm around Patterson's head, crushing him against her chest. Her arm tensed with hard curves of muscle.

"God damn it, NO," Rafish screamed as he threw his shoulder against Tanja's back. Her body was horrifying hard, like steel warmed by the sunlight. He struggled to pull his hands from his crude manacles, and managed to get one free, but not without leaving some skin behind. He grabbed her arm to try to loosen it, but it too felt as if it was carved from steel. "No, please, let go of him," he pleaded.

She turned to look at him, the fierce look in her eyes softening as they met his.

"Please," Rafish pleaded again. "He's just a helpless man."

Patterson's helmet was starting to deform and his eyes were rolling up in his head when Tanja released him. He staggered and fell to his knees, holding his aching head, his forcefield flaring hot as he coughed up more blood.

Tanja looked disgusted. "It is dishonorable in my Order to let an enemy suffer a painful death."

"We never give up hope for our injured," Rafish countered.

"Then let your injured care for each other."

Before Rafish could thank her, she grabbed his wrist and began to run, dragging him behind her. She had to find the others before it became too dark to search.

# Chapter 33

*(Date: 1052-11-02, 18:20 ST)*

Durgin, Marine Captain Alejan Barstenal and Sergeant Roth Yanni were running for their lives. They'd heard the men's screams in the distance, and Durgin had seen the face of their attacker on Patterson's suit video. A beautiful woman dressed in red, her eyes a stunning aquamarine, her height nearly two meters.

Alejan was staring at the telemetry display on his wrist. "Gallup is KIA, so is Bartels. Smyth is heading toward the city, Captain. About two clicks north of us. Patterson is in bad shape, internal injuries. Krupps's armor is offline. He and Patterson are stationary back near the landing site. Rafish looks O.K, but he's traveling fast, moving our way." He studied his instrument. "Shit. He's not alone. He's moving way too fast and I'm getting stress readings around his wrist. I think one of those Prime bitches has him."

"One Prime or two?"

"Gotta be two back there, Captain. The attacks were only seconds apart, but locations spaced nearly eight hundred meters separated. No idea if there are together or not now."

"Those überbitches can move fast."

Alejan looked at his sergeant. "At least it'll be dark in twenty minutes. Sunset is brief here."

"Those bitches can see through things, not least the dark," Yanni added with a shiver as he looked toward the setting sun.

"It's still better than daylight. Pestrov said something about tachyon levels being very low in this system."

"Yeah, but this rock has two fucking big moons. What quarter are they in?"

"Didn't check," Alejan said as they started to run again. "We gotta keep moving. I'll look it up next time we stop."

The men were soon running at a speed that would have dazzled a sprinter from old Earth, their armor darkening stealthily to blend in with the dark trees. Durgin struggled to keep up with the more practiced Marines, but sixty kilometers per hour was all he could manage. His suit provided the strength and the computer-augmented coordination, but he had to dodge trees and leap small streams on his own. The terrain was getting increasingly rugged. He cursed silently beneath his breath. Less than half an hour on the ground and he'd lost more than half his team, and now at least one of the Rostrans was tracking them. It was only a matter of time before she caught up. Even worse, he was no closer to finding Alisa than he'd been up on the ship.

He stumbled and almost fell, Yanni's strong arm the only thing that kept him going. He thought of Alisa, and suddenly had a vision of her swooping down to save him. He didn't care what anyone else knew about her now. About him, about anything. Men were dying. He was lost. They might all be lost by morning.

It was all his fault.

## Chapter 34

*(Date: 1052-11-02, 18:40 ST)*

Cleric Sundanjan stood inside the circle of Elders. She looked tired, but her eyes were glowing with determination.

"The moment is upon us. The Kelsorians are invading our world, and several of them have eluded the Guardians, at least for the night. More significantly, a second Velorian spy is now hidden among the Kelsorians. Like the girl, she has been welcomed by the Gwyndylyn."

The Bishop looked at the other Elders, a silent communication passing between them. He turned back to the Cleric. "Do the Gwyndylyn truly know she is in their midst?"

The Cleric bowed. "They must, Your Worship. They have harbored the girl Lara inside their compound for years. Clearly they would recognize another of the Heathens in their midst."

"Then it is your conclusion that the Gwyndylyn are attempting to overthrow the Goddess? That they are reverting to their former ways? Joining even with our hated enemy?"

"With respect, Your Worship, I have stated their willingness to do so on many occasions."

"And so you have," the ancient woman sighed. She and the other Elders had been children when the ship crashed. Now over one-hundred and ten years old, they had already lived nearly twice the lifespan of the working Betans of Aria. The Goddess and her charms had preserved them.

"Then you will finally give me permission to act?"

The Bishop nodded slowly. "We do."

Cleric Sundanjan's tiredness faded as her life's mission was finally fulfilled. It was time to shift the balance of power back to the Church. Soon the Gwyndylyn would be chained in gold and lined up in front of the annihilation chamber.

She turned and walked back into the east wing of the Church. "Prepare the prisoner for execution."

The monyk looked up at the Cleric in shock. "But... but she carries the power of the Goddess in her."

"The waves of agony from her death will spread across all of Rostran, incapacitating all those who were once Primal."

"As the Goddess wills."

"And then bring Marla to the Church for her preparation."

"She is to be sacrificed too?" the monyk asked in a shocked voice.

"No. She has proven more faithful than her sister. We have a mission for her. Unlike Anyal. Her sister's disobedience will end in our chamber tonight." She turned to look into the worried faces of the gathering monyk's and priests. "Tomorrow morning, Rostran will be united under the Goddess, and the stewardship of the Church will be rewarded."

"*Goddess' will be done*," the faithful intoned.

## Chapter 35

(Date: 1052-11-02, 19:00 ST)

Alisa fidgeted nervously as Tala's flitter descended to land on a privileged pad on the roof of the Great Hall. There had been a lot of excitement back at *Rivera* as they'd left to fly here, what with flitters taking off at high speed. Tala had insisted that Lara could handle her shipmates and had insisted that Alisa come with her to the play.

Tala stepped out of the flitter first, and was greeted by two young girls who guided her through a silver-gilded doorway. Obviously some kind of VIP entrance. Excelsia ran forward and grabbed Alisa's wrist tightly to tug her toward a second door. "Come on, we're almost late."

They descended a dozen curving flights to burst through a door into an auditorium. The seats were mostly filled by an exclusively female audience of several hundred. All Gwyndlyn as far as Alisa could see.

She was still amazed that Tala had not only let her live, but had insisted that she wanted her to teach the younger Gwyndlyn about advanced physics and astronomy, especially Alisa's specialty of wormhole navigation. Alisa wasn't certain if she was being recruited or had become a captive. In any case, Excelsia seemed to be under orders to hang on to her.

Excelsia had barely dragged Alisa to their seats in the tenth row when some called out. "The Goddess, our protector. She comes!"

Everyone began chanting... Goddess, Goddess, Goddess..."

The audience quickly hushed a moment later when the curtains opened to reveal a very tall and muscular woman lying on a narrow, white bed.





She rose to slowly put on what looked like an ancient warrior's uniform. Made of leather and metal armor, and studded with jewels. She carried a broadsword of a meter and a half length which she proved was sharp by cutting in half one of the life-sized leather figures of soldiers that were arrayed across the stage. She swirled around the stage, swinging the heavy sword powerfully, cutting more of the soldiers in half, the keening sizzle of the blade resonating through the room as it cleaved air and hard leather with equal ease.



The lights suddenly grew brighter as a second figure dropped from the balcony four stories above. Dressed only in the blue top of a Protector's uniform, her reddish hair was streaked with blonde. She landed lightly on her feet despite the long fall. Obviously another Gwyndlyn.



The Protector slammed her fist into the leather-clad warrior's stomach, sending her flying across the stage. The woman fought back, only to have the Protector grab her body to smash her to the stage floor. She straddled the warrior, jamming her fist into her diaphragm. It was the killing move of a Velorian.

The warrior resisted, and the mock battle swirled mightily across the stage, the two of them leaping high into the air to impact in mid-air three stories off the stage, only to fall back with a resounding crash.

Excelsia leaned over to whisper in Alisa's ear. "The *Dance of the Freyen*. Some call it the sword dance. It's a celebration of the day we became a free people."

Alisa nodded, watching with fascination. Rostran culture was starting to make sense to her. She guessed that this had once been a remote colony of free Arions, and a Protector had come to destroy them. They'd apparently fought her off, and were now re-enacting that dramatic event.

The battle continued. Alisa thought the Primal warrior would be victorious, but she staggered and fell under blows that were real enough to be felt as sharp blows out in the audience twenty meters away. The crack of fists crashing against invulnerable skin took Alisa's breath away. This might be a

reenactment, but the two women were hitting each other with all their Gwyndlyn strength.

Minutes later, the Arion warrior lay dying on the floor, surrounded by what looked like real blood. Shockingly, the Prime's arm was bent at an odd angle. The Protector leaped high into the air, dancing around her fallen prey in joy. Her leaps were so powerful that she really looked as if she could fly. Then the lights dimmed to near darkness. The end of the scene.

No one said anything. No applause. Not even a whisper. It was like everyone was holding their breath. Alisa heard several women sob, overcome with emotion.

A blinding glare suddenly lit the center of the stage, and a wave of intense heat followed it, causing many in the audience to gasp and cover their faces. An egg-shaped object appeared in mid-air just above a ceramic heat shield. The intense energy beam struck the egg to reveal a figure inside. Shockingly, the white-hot radiation spectrum was that of a Vendorian Klav'en.

Alisa's thoughts raced wildly. How could this be? A scant few seconds of energy was all she could withstand. The focused beam of a Klav'en would vaporize a Prime in twenty seconds. A Protector would last maybe twice as long. Yet the burst continued, heating the occupant's body to incandescence.

Twenty seconds passed. Then thirty. Forty. A minute. Two minutes. She glowed as brightly as a newborn star now, the tile wall behind her starting to melt, the stage floor catching fire. The clothing of the people in the front rows started to smoke. Yet the audience stared silently transfixed as a glowing girl opened her arms, tearing the egg open, seemingly welcoming the power. Her movements and long hair reminded Alisa of Lara, but her body was glowing so brightly that she couldn't make out her features.

Alisa gawked as the girl sat down and cradled the warrior's broken body to her own. The warrior's torn clothing burst into flame as the girl held her tighter to herself. So tightly that the two of them seemed to be melting together. Alisa opened her eyes wide as she struggled to look past the visible spectrum, looking for the special effects, but she was again dazzled by the energy field.

Then, as suddenly as the light appeared, it disappeared, leaving a single person standing before the holographic stage background of a lake. She appeared to be in her mid-teens and stunningly red-headed. She rose and walked to the edge of the stage to stand proudly before them.





The audience began chanting again: "Goddess, she has come. Our Goddess, our Queen..."

Alisa's heart was in her throat as the girl seemed to stare directly at her.

"This is how our Queen was born," Excelsia whispered. "The Goddess came and joined with her."

"Goddess? Joining? What just happened here?"

"Renewal. A new joining with the Creator. It's her," she whispered reverently. "The Goddess"

"Who... the girl? She looks so young. And that Klav'en. It was real. So was the battle. The injuries."

Excelsia nodded vigorously. "Be quiet, the best part is yet to come. The blade is Vendorian-made."

The Protector now returned, falling as before from high above the stage. She held her hands to her breasts in the heart to heart gesture of greeting to the queen.

The Protector reached out and took the girl's hands in hers, guiding her back to her feet. The girl guided the Protector's hands to her own breasts in Rostran style, then opened her arms to show that she'd put herself in the Protector's power.

The Protector's warm smile faded as the tendons on her hands suddenly stood out like steel cables. She cruelly crushed the girl in her grip, lifting her high off the stage, demonstrating to all the falseness of her gesture of welcome. The girl hung helplessly as the Protector released one breast and jammed her fist up under her ribs. The red-headed cried out in the pain of betrayal.

The fight began anew. The girl grabbed the huge sword and slashed powerfully at the Protector, a flash of sparks marking each blow of steel against even harder skin. As before, Alisa realized, it was not an act. The Protector's blue top was slashed from her body until she stood naked and revealed in the middle of the stage. The girl approached her, and the Protector cowered in fear. The girl showed no mercy. She grabbed the Protector's hair and lifted her into the air, and then cruelly stabbed upward with her huge sword, impaling the Protector in the most intimate way.

The red-head raised her broadsword high into the air, the Protector spasming on the end of it in what was definitely not an act. She paraded around the stage with the supposed Protector over her head as the crowd burst into applause. It was the most disturbingly erotic thing Alisa had ever seen.

The parade ended as the girl flipped her sword over to slam the Protector's back down onto the stage. She leaned on the hilt of the sword to pin her to the ground. The supposed Protector screamed in violent passion and pain and died badly.

The girl jerked the sword from the Protector's limp body to kneel reverently in the center of the stage. She focused a blaze of her own heat vision on the tip of it as she began to crush the sharp steel with her hands. The only sound from the audience was that of excited breathing as she slowly folded the blade over itself several times until it was no longer than the hilt. It was glowing cherry-red.

"The final phase of the sword dance," Excelsia whispered excitedly. "My favorite part."

The scene suddenly changed to a lake, the background hologram realistic in appearance. The girl hovered in mid-air as she guided the crushed sword inward to herself, intimately taking all of the folded blade. Alisa stared with mouth open as the queen twisted the hilt and then jerked it to the side, snapping the blade off inside herself. She tossed the now useless hilt across the stage to land on the Protector's body, signifying the end of violence forever.

The girl rose, tensing her inner muscles around the thick blade. A smattering of enthusiastic applause started as a brilliant flare of white light began to expand outward from the compressed metal.

The rest of the audience joined them, leaping to their feet as a trickle of molten steel flowed down her inner thighs, the roar of voices and thundering applause shaking the. The girl stood casually, hand on one thigh, staring back at the crowd as she clenched the steel with unimaginable pressure.

Alisa knew at that moment that she was witnessing the ultimate expression of feminine strength in the universe.

The standing ovation seemed to go on forever.

## Chapter 36

*(Date: 1052-11-02, 21:30 ST)*

Alisa had a hundred questions for Excelsia after they'd exited the theatre, a crowd of boisterous playgoers dragging them to a bar across the street.

"Who was she?"

"I told you. The Goddess."

"But where did she come from... and that strength... not even a Kryp'terran could do that."

"I don't know anything about Krypt'terrans."

Alisa persisted. "What I found amazing is that significant portions of that play seemed real. The Klav'en in particular. No one can absorb that much power."

"Clearly the Goddess can," Excelsia shrugged. "You were privileged to see her. No Outworlder has cast eyes upon her true form before."

"What are you trying to tell me? That what I saw was not a re-enactment?"

"Portions were. The Protector's name was Zela, she was born of my *salon*. I played the role of Protector one year, but Zela has proven to be the better actress. Her hair color is unusually light for a Rostran, and with coloring it almost looks blonde."

"You were... impaled? Like that?"

Excelsia smiled tolerantly. "A human would not understand. But a mere sword could not cause a Gwyndylyn pain." She squeezed Alisa's arm and leaned closer, her lips gently brushing Alisa's ear. "Quite the contrary, it's one of our favorite rituals," she whispered softly.

Alisa shivered. She didn't want any damn sword inside her. Excelsia held her closer, and placed her hand suggestively on Alisa's knee as she felt her shiver. "Our sisterhood has many levels, Alisa. At its lowest, there are enhanced humans like you among us. But only we Gwyndylyn are fully empowered."

"Then there are obviously no Velorians here?" she asked, testing what Tala had said about intolerance.

Excelsia stiffened, her grip turning painful. "A Heathen?" she hissed. "Living here? What an obscene thought. It's bad enough that we have to put up with Lara. And you saw what the Goddess did to the supposed Protector during the renewal. A Protector's demise would be far more painful if she visited Rostran today."

Alisa's shiver turned to real fear. Tala's invitation to join them now seemed less of an opportunity than a way to avoid being killed. A likelihood if she refused to join them, certainly if the *Flame* tried to depart the system. As before, she tried not to show her fear. "Well, the renewal play was certainly fascinating, that's for sure, Excelsia. But I'm sure my questions about it can wait for later. But I just can't stop wondering who the girl was?"

Excelsia lowered her voice. "She is our greatest secret. But since Tala has said that you intend to become a *teclan'ar* of our *salon*, you were allowed to see what only the Gwyndylyn know. The Clerics worship the Goddess, but she does not appear among them. The Senators, all Betan, and most of the others do not truly believe. Only we Gwyndylyn understand the true nature of our Goddess."

Excelsia lowered her voice to whisper excitedly. "Her name is Tyla. She is one of us."

"But she couldn't be a Prime, Excelsia," Alisa whispered back. "The Klav'en alone would prove that."

Excelsia's lips brushed against Alisa's, soft and inviting. "She is of the creators."

Alisa was too surprised by her words to pull away from the uninvited kiss. "I don't understand. What creator?"

"You do know about the Supremis?" Excelsia murmured as her kiss deepened. "The origin of the Arions and the Heathens? Do they not teach you anything in human schools?"

"You mean Skietra?" Alisa exclaimed, pulling away from Excelsia's kiss. "The myths say she was Galen, although I think most of the Galen thing is just a story that churches use to keep people coming to worship services."

Excelsia's passionate look hardened to a scowl as she flopped back in her chair, obviously frustrated. "This is the second time you have used the term myth for the reality of our culture. You claim to want to learn about us, Alisa, yet you insult us."

"I'm truly sorry, Excelsia. I'm not trying to insult anyone. I'm just having trouble grasping what you're saying."

"Then listen more and talk less."

Alisa took a sip of her drink, her thoughts racing. She couldn't be quiet. "You're telling me you believe that the person I just saw, this person named Tyla, is a Galen?"

Excelsia rolled her eyes. "She wasn't a cursed Virago, that's for damn sure. Are all humans as slow to learn as you are?"

"It's... it's just so amazing. A Galen?"

"Enough of this," Excelsia said sharply as she sat up straight, abruptly changing the subject. "If Tala wishes it so, she can reveal more. Talk to me about something else."

"But I want to talk..."



"No," Excelsia said firmly.

Alisa sagged back in her chair, thoughts racing. Obviously Excelsia was angry with her, likely frustrated too. The air was thick with pheromones. "O.K. Lets talk about, hell I don't know, why my scanning devices can't penetrate the walls of these buildings."

"I know nothing of instruments," Excelsia said sourly. "But everyone knows that our sun lacks tachyons. The background level from other stars is essentially zero."

"A world where a Prime's vision sense is occluded."

"We have grown beyond that word. Please stop using it."

"But only the women are... empowered?"

"Of course. We Gwyndylyn do not share such dangerous power with men."

"A true matriarchy," Alisa mused, fascinated. "How fascinating."

"It is the only true way to ensure peace. Men are warlike and brutal by nature. They must be controlled."

"But what about the Velorians? Their Protectors are all female and they are warriors."

Several heads snapped up to stare at Alisa.

Excelsia leaned closer as she lowered her voice to a growl. "Do not speak of such obscenities here, Alisa. We call them the Heathen because their females kill like men do. They have turned their back on the legacy of the feminine. They threaten the entire concept of femininity. Even worse, they hunt us, killing our people as if we were but dangerous animals to be culled."

Alisa stared back at her in undisguised shock. She'd always suspected the Velorian perspective on Arions was overly simplified. So too, she now realized, was the Rostran view of Velor. "That's... that's horrible," she said, surprised that she found herself sympathizing with Excelsia. She had her own very personal reasons for disliking Protectors.

"Which is why our entire *salon* would attack such a person if they came here."

Alisa could only nod. Her thoughts were swirling as the wonder of Rostran culture crashed in on her. A supposed goddess, as impossible as it seemed, likely a young Galen. She and some queen led a matriarchy, itself formed as a reaction to the way her own people behaved toward Arions. They lived on a hidden island in space, divorced from Empire or Enlightenment. A peaceful world of women.

Her words were barely more than a whisper when she spoke again. "Given the beauty that surrounds us here, Excelsia, despite this violent universe, Rostran is indeed a precious jewel to be protected."

Excelsia beamed. "So, you do understand. Will you join us then? Our *salon* isn't all about strength and power. Humans like yourself are treasured as well. Especially for what you know of the sciences." She placed her hand over Alisa's again. "Even more importantly, a young woman with such a warm heart needs a

true home. A place to truly belong. An Eden to share with her sisters of the heart."

Alisa felt a genuine wave of uplifting emotions. For a brief moment, the Rostran culture made sense. Her words came unbidden. "A world where a woman doesn't have to pretend to be less than she is. It's a beautiful vision."

"Not just a vision, Alisa. It is our reality. One the Goddess will ensure remains true for all eternity."

Alisa looked into Excelsia's dark blue eyes. "But... but what if someone comes to you who is... is not exactly as you understand them?"

"We care nothing of a woman's background. Once she has come to Rostran, once she sees and embraces the beauty of our life, once she falls in love with the Goddess, then she is a sister of the heart. Whatever life you may have had in the past, Alisa, whatever you have done, wherever you came from, no matter where born, it is of no consequence to us. You would be as if born again."

"Can I trust my life to such words?" Alisa said softly. "There are so many things I have not told you."

Excelsia held her hand tighter. "You can trust my heart, Alisa. A heart which reaches out to you. Join me, and become the transcendent woman you were born to be. A Gwyndlyn."

## Chapter 37

*(Date: 1052-11-03, 03:00 ST)*

Durgin was struggling to keep up as Yanni set the pace up the long ridge. Despite the undiminished power of his exoskeleton, he was exhausted. He paused to catch his breath as Yanni climbed onto the last rock, his stealthy armor momentarily visible against the rising disk of the second moon. A vulnerable moment, but they had no choice if they were going to gain the ridge top. Yanni cleared the rock and moved back into the cover of darkness between the boulders.

Durgin was next. His exoskeleton whined softly as he leaped across a six-meter wide chasm to land on top of the boulder. He quickly scrambled across the smooth top, and was about to jump down to a lower boulder when he saw motion out of the corner of his eye. He instinctively ducked, only to have a rock the size of his head soar through the space he'd just been standing in. The tearing wind in its wake nearly knocked him off his feet. He looked up with his infrared monocular to see a woman silhouetted against the stars on the ridgeline above them.

"Down. Everyone down!" Durgin called urgently. He heard the metallic clatter of exoskeletons crunching against rock. "On the ridge, two hundred meters above us."

"God damn it," Alejan cursed. "How'd she get past us?"

Durgin slipped off the exposed top of the boulder and dropped back into the darkness between boulders. "Going to be slow going if we have to climb between these things."

"Climb?" Alejan replied in astonishment. "She's up there."

"There was two of them," Durgin reminded him. "Want to bet the other one is closing from below us?"

"Damn it. No room to maneuver here, Captain. Our only hope was to stay hidden."

Durgin lifted his head out of the shadow far enough to study the ridge top. "Too late for that now." He saw two figures on the ridge now. He zoomed in with his night vision optic. "Sweet Jesus, they've got one of our men. What's the telemetry say?"

Hidden behind the boulder, Alejan tapped his wrist and his display lit up, showing the locations of his men. Rafish's symbol was glowing green, and it was exactly 232 meters away. "It's Rafish. Vitals green. Heart rate fast, but no signs of exertion or pain. I'm tapping into his video."

His display flickered for a moment, and then resolved itself into an image of a young woman with very dark skin. The enhanced imagery of the camera showed her nearly as clearly as if she'd been standing in sunlight. Rafish was staring at her.

"That's not the Rostran warrior we engaged near the landing site," Alejan said with a shake of his head. "Looks like Rafish's sister or something."

Rafish turned his head to focus his camera down on the boulder field where they were hiding. Alejan saw a flash of light. He quickly covered his wrist display, and then turned it off. "We're exposed as hell here."

Durgin's communicator sputtered to life, violating the strict no-transmit protocol. "Captain, Rafish here. You should climb the rest of the way to the ridge. Tanja won't hurt you. But she needs to take you to the Rostran authorities before the other Guardian reaches you."

Durgin glanced at Alejan, who shrugged. He pressed the button to activate his transmitter. "We've got men down, Rafish. KIA. Some injured back at the landing site. Are you O.K?"

"Nothing that won't heal. The fatalities were caused by the other Guardian after you fired on her. Tanja won't hurt you if you keep your weapons on Safe."

During muted his communicator. "What do you think, Alejan? Under duress or does he really believe that?"

The Marine Captain stared at his wrist computer display. "Some stress in the voice print. But computer says he's telling what he thinks is the truth."

"What he thinks, huh?"

"Haven't got a lot of choices here, Captain. We go up and surrender, or we go wait until that murderous bitch finds us."

"Up," Durgin said quickly. "Yanni, you're closest. Go."

The Marine looked back at Durgin with scared eyes, and then followed his orders. He stood up into the bright moonlight. He'd taken a bare two steps when his backpack exploded into a riot of sparkles. Durgin snapped his eyes to the right, looking downhill, and saw two narrow blue red beams coming from a brilliantly lit face. A Prime was standing less than a hundred meters away and trying to kill one of his men. Without thinking, he lifted his L7 and fired a burst of GAR fire at those eyes.

Yanni tumbled forward to slide down between two boulders, his exoskeleton glowing in shades of red and orange, the force field enclosing him like a small cocoon. The Prime leaped upward, and Durgin's GAR beam hit her in mid-air. Her legs began to glow a translucent red from the direct hit. It didn't slow her down. She jumped again to land on the boulder directly over Durgin's head. He stared upward along strong, feminine legs, the radiation from her skin nearly blinding him. A misplaced thought crossed his mind. Her legs looked as slender and perfect as Alisa's.

That thought was snuffed out when she dropped down to land on his shoulders, those beautiful legs closing around his head like a vice. He grabbed her knees and struggled with all his exoskeletal strength to open them, but her thighs crushed painfully inward, feeling as hard as sculpted steel. She tried to cross her ankles to multiply her strength, but Durgin turned up his force field all the way. The painful press of her pubic bone against his brain stem grew more painful by the second.

Petrov had made it clear that if a Prime encircled his body with their limbs, neither exoskeleton nor force field could long resist them. Their muscles were the proud gift of the Galen.

A gift of ultimate power from the creator.

He opened his mouth to scream, knowing he was about to die.

## Chapter 38

*(Date: 1052-11-03, 03:30 ST)*

Alisa awoke to the sound distant screaming. Not the screams of someone excited or the pleasurable agony of making love. It was the scream of terror and mortal agony.

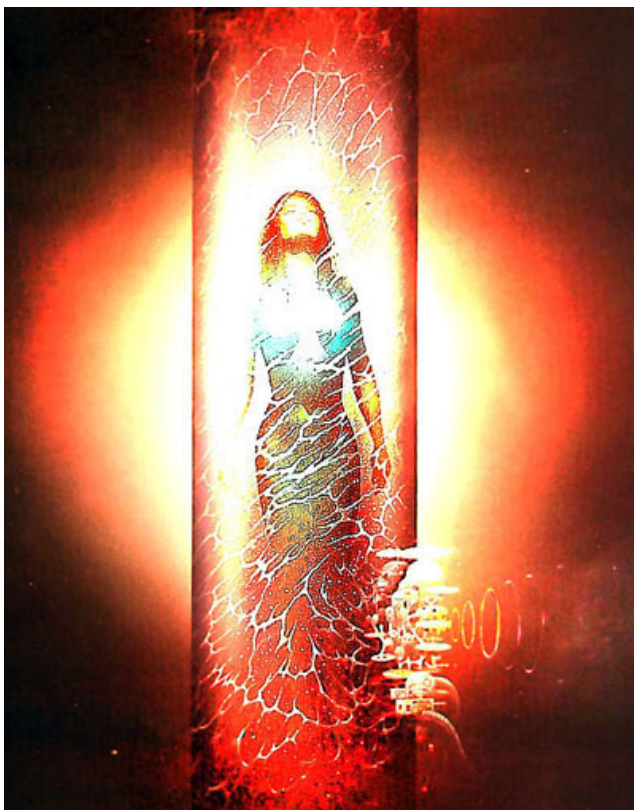
She snapped bolt upright in her bed, moving so fast that the bed clothes flew across the room in a wall of white. Disoriented, she felt a horrible, buzzing sensation starting to wash over her. It quickly grew stronger,

permeating the air of the room, sending wave after wave of agony through her body. She was suddenly doubled over by a woman's cramping pain. She fumbled around to see if she was wearing gold, but found only sweaty skin.

She slid from the bed to stagger toward the open window, not daring to try to fly. A beam of moonlight made her skin glow pale, and all around her, she saw lights blinking on in the other towers. The air was filled with frightened voices, some in pain, others shouting angrily. Clearly whatever that horrible buzzing was, it was affecting the Gwyndlyn as well.

Alisa was soon gripping her stomach with both hands as it felt as if her body was tearing itself apart from inside out. Her legs began to shake and she collapsed into a chair, gasping for breath between long spasms of pain. She tried to stand, only to have another spasm drop her to her knees. She vomited, only to have a brilliant ball of light burst into life in the middle of her room as her stomach heaved.

A long tube gradually appeared inside the hologram, extending from floor to ceiling, the walls transparent and glowing incandescently. A woman was standing inside the tube, her chest glowing brighter by the moment. The deafening screams were that echoed in her ears coming from that woman's mouth.



Alisa stared in abject horror as something malignant began to eat away at the lower right edge of the tube, sending crackling surges of energy upward. The woman's legs slowly vanishing into a boiling red plasma, and Alisa's own agony moved upward in perfect synchronization. She knew with horrible

certainty that she was feeling what the woman in the tube was feeling. She imagined she was being slashed apart from the inside by a thousand jagged knives. Her stomach seemed to explode, sending its contents upward to gag her.

The woman was dying, she knew that now, and she was somehow broadcasting her pain. She heard the voices of a dozen Gwyndyl'n crying out for it to stop. Alisa gritted her teeth and tried to endure it, but the horrible annihilation made her bones vibrate so hard they felt as if they were going to shatter. Tentacles of searing energy found her breasts, the imagined knives slashing at them, threatening to release the inhuman power inside. She held her own breasts with all her strength, instinctively trying to contain the orgone, feeling them balloon in her hands, threatening to...

A flash as brilliant as a nuclear burst suddenly cast Alisa's shadow blackly across the room. The actinic glare rose upward from the other side of the mountains to illuminate the night sky. The hologram exploded into a million bright spots of light at the same time, and her pain doubled and redoubled again as the hologram shrunk into a tiny ball and then vanished, sucking away her consciousness with it.

Alisa's heart froze in mid-beat, and she crumpled to the floor, her mouth frozen in a scream, her sightless eyes staring at the ceiling.

**Look for Episode Two of *The Gwyndlyn*... coming soon.**