

# **Project Archangel – Paix des Femmes**

Book One, Part One (Prologue through Chapter 16)

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(See the Photo Gallery at <http://velorian.org/auow/photo.htm> to see the author's pictorial view of characters)

## **Prologue**

*Friday, October 18, 2019 10:15pm, Dulles International Airport,  
Washington DC*

Special Agent Kendrick Howell spotted her for the second time as he walked out of the Airbus. She was already up the Jetway by the time he'd squirmed through the narrow aisle to reach the door, but she was easy to spot in the concourse. As tall as most men, adorned with long blonde hair, she stood out like an exotic beacon in the usual crowd of gray, tired passengers.

He'd first seen her in LA. He was waiting to board when the airline representative from the First Class lounge escorted a handful of privileged passengers into the front section of the huge A380. She'd stood out like an angel in the middle of a group of suits.

Unfortunately, as a civil servant, he flew Coach. He didn't care, or at least, he hadn't until that moment. He was just glad the giant old A380's were flying again. The Pulse had put them down for nearly seven years while parts for their computerized flight controls were

being fabricated. It was said that the new system wasn't nearly as good as the original, but the planes seemed to fly O.K. and they were as comfortable as ever.

Kendrick amused himself during the long trip to DC by putting his detective's curiosity to work. Was she a model? An actress? She looked vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place her behind her sunglasses. He plugged his PersComp into the Net at his seat and searched the databases of LA personalities, but didn't find her picture. He pushed the limits of privilege by signing into the neural net at work, but without a photo, fingerprints or an iris scan, the search engines weren't much help.

He put his tradecraft to work as he followed her down the Dulles concourse. He faded back into the crowd, studying her from the corners of his eyes. A field agent's stock in trade.

Her legs were long and lean beneath her short LA styled skirt, the tight muscles of a serious runner tensing visibly with each step. She was taller than he'd first estimated. Five foot eleven without heels. Maybe six feet. Her blonde hair was tied off with a red elastic band to hang in a single braid that fell to the small of her back. She held herself with a model's posture, her shoulders square.

She was dressed simply but expensively in a cream skirt and pale blue sweater. She paused in the warmth of the overheated terminal to pull the sweater off, revealing a sleeveless white top. Slender, elegant arms, also very fit. Her skin looked like she'd just

finished sun bathing on some tropical beach. Her tan was more golden than brown. She complimented the shade with a polished gold bracelet on her left wrist. No rings on her fingers. Her ears weren't pierced. Now that was unusual.

She shoved her sweater into her bag and continued down the concourse. She moved with an athletic grace, a sensuous ripple traveling down her body with every long step. Her hips swayed ever so slightly, her buttocks tightly flexing under her tight skirt. He'd never seen anyone move quite like that before. Almost like a cat. He decided she had to be phenomenally fit, but she didn't look like an athlete. Not enough muscle.

Kendrick took a deep breath and quickened his pace. If he was going to approach her, he knew the best place would be in Baggage Claim. Women like her usually traveled with huge bags. He could lend a hand to give himself an excuse to get close to her. To Tala.

He was still a little embarrassed that he'd taken advantage of his credentials to get her name from the flight attendant. Tala Laut. An unusual name for someone who was obviously from northern Europe.

Baggage Claim was coming up when she suddenly turned into the United Airlines First Class International lounge. Kendrick walked past the entrance and stopped, his heart pounding. Damn it. She was probably taking an international hop to Europe. If he wanted to get in there and talk to her, he'd have to use his badge. His membership in the Red Carpet club had lapsed last year.

No, he told himself. He wasn't going to abuse his privileges a second time. He at least had her name. He'd look her up the next time he was in LA.

He reluctantly pulled his eyes from the glass door and trudged slowly toward Baggage Claim. It was just as well. She had that look of ultra expensive breeding that was clearly the result of centuries of genetic selection. Selection done the way the upper crust of Europe had always done it. Money marrying beauty.

He was just an American civil servant, a senior one perhaps, but still living on a salary. Women like Tala Laut didn't think about salaries. Or houses in Virginia. She was used to company of men who talked about their estates, their royal connections, perhaps the number of companies or vineyards they owned. Men who named their yachts after their wives.

He felt tired and faintly depressed as he grabbed his well-traveled leather bag from the belt and headed for the exit. Ever since his wife had died, he'd wanted to meet someone new. He was trying to be realistic, but after being out of the dating game for twenty years, he knew he wasn't much of a catch. Mary had been a beautiful woman, both when he married her and when she died of breast cancer. He still thought of her as that tall, athletic blonde who'd dazzled him on the sidelines at the University of Wisconsin.

He'd been the starting quarterback of the team in his senior year, and she'd been a cheerleader. An All-American couple everyone

said. They'd married two years later. A good marriage. One that lasted twenty years. They'd been both lovers and best friends. The envy of their friends. And then the cancer took her.

He still saw her face in his dreams, cheering him on from the sidelines. He measured all other women against her standard. He knew he had to move on, that it wasn't healthy to dwell on his dead wife, to compare other women to her. But he hadn't met anyone who interested him.

Until Tala Laut. There was something about her that he couldn't put his finger on. Something exotic and alien and exciting. Something that other women didn't have.

He mentally chided himself about that as he exited the building. What she had was stunning beauty. And about fifteen fewer years than he'd clocked. He was just lonely and more than a little horny and they'd passed in the night. That was all it was. She was one in a million. Expensive. Miles out of his league.

He hadn't even traded a single word with her. That depressed him further. Maybe he didn't even know how to meet women any more.

The agency car was waiting at the curb as usual. Two of his agents were standing alongside. Frank Peters and John Pierce. Frank handed him a thick briefcase full of reports. Urgent business. Which was good. It would keep him from dwelling on Tala Laut during the long ride to his home in Virginia.

As senior agent of the Interagency Terrorist Task Force, there was work to do.

There was always work to do.

*Saturday, October 19, 2019 3:25am, Patuxent River Naval Air Station, Maryland*

Lieutenant Ramon Lopez stood silently in the back of the Command Center at Patuxent River Naval Air Station. The air was soft with the hum of electronics, the overhead lights low. Two Petty Officers sat across the room, a wall of surveillance monitors in front of them, some glowing with the false colors of infrared cameras, others with the pale green of low-light cameras. Ceiling-mounted screens displayed the sweep of microwave radar as it scanned the surrounding landscape and sky. A wall map of the installation was peppered with lights denoting the locations of other sensors. Blue dots for motion sensors, and green for EM. They latter could sense the bioelectric emissions that came from any living being.

The sensors fed into the Automatic Surveillance Management System (ASMS). Ramon's invention. The complex neural net at its heart had started life as part of the sonar system in a Los Angeles-class attack submarine. Part of the 2010 fleet electronics update. Ramon's team of programmers had modified it to filter through the hundreds of signals that came in from this terrestrial sensor array, searching for patterns in the noise.

The Pulse had wiped out nearly everything electronic on that fateful day in August of 2016. The sequence of high-altitude EMP bursts had ringed the Earth. Fundamentalist Al Amid terrorists were behind it, or so most people believed. They'd threatened to turn the clock back on technology and restore the ancient Shari'ah law of the Islamic Quran.

The only state-of-the-art computers which survived the Pulse had been the ones in submerged submarines. Now, three years later, the computer industry was just starting to come back. It took computers to make computers. The submarine fleet and its neural nets had provided the spark to get it all going again.

Intel and AMD dug out the masks to their earliest and simplest microprocessors and set up a manual Fab. They laboriously re-entered paper schematics into an old CAD system that was based on 1970's style 8-bit processors. They had to re-enter every line of code from hard printouts first, which of course were missing a few revisions. They were slowly working their way back up the automation curve. Intel had just started to fabricate the Pentium 4 – a twenty-year-old design. In four more years they hoped to be back at the same level of technology they'd been at when the burst hit. A seven-year pothole in the technology curve.

The US military had become completely dependent on electronic weapons systems by 2012. So much so that it had taken two years to recover even minimal combat readiness after the Pulse. Ramon's

cobbled-together system, like many others, was part of a desperate attempt to protect US strategic assets from Al Amid. Their agents were everywhere, operating as a paramilitary force that the US had codenamed Omega. They'd taken advantage of the confusion to decimate the military leadership in the Middle East, thus ending the Saudi war with a strangled whimper. Since then, they'd swept through Europe and parts of Asia to finally arrive on the US homeland.

Washington tried to stop them with the usual anti-terrorist methods. They thought they understood Al Amid tactics. After all, they and their kind had been unleashing attacks on foreigners for fifty years prior to the Pulse. Which unfortunately had leveled the playing field.

Nobody had ever figured out where they'd gotten the warheads and missiles to launch them. Since all the Intelligence systems depended on computers and satellites, when they went down, so did decades of intelligence data. The CIA had gone back to agents in the field with codebooks. Agents who couldn't begin to penetrate the Islamic wall around the inner circle of that deadly organization.

The most devastating episode of Al Amid terrorism prior to the Pulse had been a biological attack on Christmas Day, 2011 that killed tens of thousands in Los Angeles. Subsequent attacks on Japan had collapsed their economy in 2012 had sent thousands of unemployed Japanese engineers flooding onto the world labor market. Many of them had turned up in the Middle East, secretly working for Al Amid.



They literally worked as slaves, their loved ones back home held hostage to further biological attacks. They developed advanced weapons, lethal drugs, and computer viruses that could infiltrate the tightest security.

Trillions of dollars were poured into weapons production throughout the Middle East, for the world still needed oil and was willing to pay whatever their economies could afford to buy it. The Iranians and the Saudi's both tested nuclear weapons, and then started mass-producing them. Acting out of desperation, the US attacked four weapons production sites on the Arabian Peninsula and two in Iran. On March 7, 2016, the Middle East went up in flames once again.

It was just another chapter in the endless struggle between Islamic fundamentalism versus western culture, fueled by oil money. A very human struggle whose roots went back to the tribes of Abraham. Except this time, the combatants possessed the power to destroy the world.

The war was fought with huge loss of life, starting with three nuclear attacks. The first target was an American base in Iraq. It was completely destroyed by a very dirty Saudi bomb. The return attack from a US thermonuclear warhead leveled Riyadh, killing hundreds of thousands. Al Amid smuggled a weapon into Miami and destroyed ten square miles of the downtown and a million American lives.

Both sides were in the midst of escalating their nuclear attacks when the high-altitude EMP bursts in August of 2016 melted down the weapons on both sides of the conflict.

Even that didn't stop the war. Instead of fighting with computer-controlled weapons of mass destruction, the war degenerated into an infantry battle. Fanatics ruled both sides of the battlefield. The righteous anger from the survivors of a million dead Saudis and Americans would have torn at each other with teeth and nails if that was all they had left to fight with.

That's when the so-called Omegans appeared. They utilized a very strange tactic for a terrorist group. They attacked the military leadership on both sides of the conflict. They killed every officer from the rank of Captain and above. Even more, the leaders of any force that attempted an assault were slaughtered in the night.

The suddenly leaderless troops degenerated into armed thugs roaming the deserts and cities of the Middle East. The Omegans didn't stop there. They took out the political leadership in the Middle East. Princes and Monarchs and Prime Ministers. They weren't playing favorites in their attempts to restore the ancient splendor of Babylon.

More than fifty-thousand American soldiers died. Many more were left roaming the desert, working as mercenaries. Casualties were equally heavy for Britain and Australia, the two other members of the long-standing Alliance. Nobody knew how many Arabs had

died, but the number was estimated in the tens of millions. Miami harbor was a radioactive crater. Riyadh was a glass bowl in the desert.

Ramon had been studying at the Naval Academy when the Pulse hit. When he graduated six months later, he was seconded to Langley to study the weapons technology that the Omegans were deploying. He focused on military contact reports. Not the glowing reports that the top brass pitched during their official briefings, but the hundreds of fragmented reports that made no sense.

What Ramon couldn't understand was that despite thousands of rounds fired by defenders during attacks on command posts and military units, there were no Omegan bodies, not even a blood trail. No photos or surveillance records either. Ordinary film had become obsolete years before the Pulse, and most digital cameras and their media had gone up in smoke. The handful of imaging devices they did have left were blinded during the attacks. The Omegans used portable EMP generators, their pulses wiping out anything electronic within a half-mile of the site of the attack site.

While that was predictable enough, what wasn't expected was that the soldiers' short-term memories were also wiped clean after an encounter. Presumably some kind of amnesia drug. The result was that after three years of one-sided conflict, the military didn't know who the Omegans were or how to stop them.

That wasn't what worried Ramon and his co-workers the most. The crew who worked down in the darkened basement at Langley thought that the Omegan's technology was too good. Way too good. Psychoactive amnesia drugs, portable EMP generators, bulletproof armor and powered exoskeletons that let them tear their way through armored doors. Nobody should have had that kind of working technology after the Pulse.

The CIA leadership brushed off their worries. They assumed that Al Amid had planned this all out for years in advance. They'd protected their weapons from the Pulse. After all, they'd known exactly how and when.

Ramon didn't buy it. It was too tidy. If there was one thing he'd learned from the old hands in the CIA Analysis Section, it was that there were always messy details. Loose ends and complications. The analyst's lifeblood. Yet after three years of concentrated intelligence gathering, the Omegans were squeaky clean.

Nobody was that good.

He watched as the Omegans began to hit targets in Europe and Asia in the Spring of 2018. Command and control facilities, weapons depots, killing senior officers. Ramon figured it was only a matter of time before they reached the US mainland.

When his assignment at the CIA completed in late 2018, he used what influence he had to get assigned as Security Officer at Patuxent River. There he struggled to obtain the very latest EMP-hardened

cameras and hid them behind the walls. They looked through fiber optics that were attached to pinholes in the concrete walls. He put the video feed on a Gigabyte SVPN link to a secure server a thousand miles away. It had taken all his connections in the CIA and the Pentagon, not to mention his father's electronics firm, to get access to such scarce technology.

He also placed fifty heavily armed Marine guards outside the building. Instead of the usual M-18's with their small, light bullets, he'd equipped them with the older and heavier M-14 rifle, a relic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They'd been modified to fire a hot-loaded Teflon-coated depleted-Uranium bullet that could penetrate light armor. He also placed four Marines armed with the very latest M21 plasma rifles outside the building. He hoped he wouldn't have to explain how he managed to get access to those. M21's looked like they belonged on some Terminator movie set. But a friend of his father was CEO of the company that was producing them for the Army. If anything could stop an Omegan, a laser-assisted plasma rifle could.

Naval Security in Washington thought he was overdoing it, but Ramon worried he was doing just the opposite. His fellow CIA analysts had hypothesized that the Omegans wore Russian Talatan body armor, the best in the business. It was made of titanium-ceramic alloy and coated in artificial Diamond-Like-Carbon. It was bulletproof and had microactuators in the joints to increase the strength of the wearer by dozens of times.

Ramon still wasn't convinced. There had to be more to it than that. Not unless somebody had come up with an improved armor that amplified the wearer's strength by hundreds of times. He'd seen the classified battle damage assessments and he'd done his own calculations. Armored Personnel Carriers had been overturned without explosives or mechanized vehicles. The gripping imprints of the attackers' hands had been left in the armor.

None of his old friends in the CIA would share anything more with him until an old classmate from the Academy slipped him a highly classified picture. It showed a steel security door that had been torn apart by someone's hands. The official report said someone with an exoskeleton had done it. His friend showed him otherwise. There were fingernail scratches. Deep ones. Forensics had lifted partial prints from the metal.

The brass didn't want to hear that. Fingerprints didn't fit their exoskeleton model, nor did the narrow finger-shaped grooves that had been cut into that door. Any theory that fit that kind of data would have to run closer to science fiction than military intelligence. Comic book stuff.

The CIA naturally pointed the finger at the Chinese. They'd been involved in some very illegal genetic engineering, all of which had supposedly gotten wiped out in the peasant revolt that came after the Pulse. What was most intriguing was that there had been a series of rumors that came out of Beijing back in 2010. Rumors about

superhuman subjects being used in weapons experiments.

Bulletproof subjects.

All the CIA knew for sure was that the Chinese goal had been to create soldiers who could survive on a nuclear battlefield. Clearly a Talatan exoskeleton would be very effective for someone who already had many times a normal human's strength. Even better for someone who wasn't easily injured.

Ramon's theories didn't stop there. He woke up one night with scenes from an old X-File movie going through his head. He wasn't the only one. Some very bright Chinese scientists had taken a sudden interest in extraterrestrial sightings back in 2011. They'd started researching the kind of stuff the saucer nuts published on the Web. Abductions, visitations, flying saucers. The whole bit. Unfortunately, they'd disappeared during the peasant revolt.

Things got worse. Much worse. The Omegans started targeting American weapons depots in January of 2019. They went after nuclear weapons and the people who controlled them. Since Patuxent Naval Air Station managed the few remaining nuclear-capable torpedoes in the US inventory, Ramon knew the battle was going to eventually come to him. When it did, he was determined to reveal the truth.

A truth that would shake people's beliefs and convictions to their roots. He no longer believed that the Omegan's technology came from Japanese engineers.

He feared that it came from further away than that.

Much further.



# Paix des Femmes

## *Book One*

### **Chapter One**

*Tuesday, October 22, 2019 3:45am, Patuxent River Naval Air Station, Maryland*

The omnipresent whisper of static and the hum of computer fans were the only sounds that disturbed the dimly lit interior of the Command Center. It was nearly four in the morning. The two Petty Officers sat in front of their wall of glowing monitors, fingers dancing across keyboards. They were keeping tabs on the various sensors that were arrayed across the base.

Behind them, Lieutenant Ramon Lopez slumped tiredly in his chair, yawning as he glanced up at the wall clock. He'd slept less than four hours a night for the last week, and the fatigue was catching up to him. He idly flipped from one sensor array to another as he struggled to stay awake. He paused when he got to the CO's quarters.

Captain Steve Dexheimer had moved into the lowest level of the complex for protection. He'd converted the old bomb shelter into a small apartment. The shelter had originally been built in the years following the Cuban Missile Crisis, back when the US strategy was

that of fighting and winning a strategic nuclear war. It had briefly served as a regional command post following the Pulse.

The audio picked up the steady sound of his breathing. Ramon smiled. He couldn't understand how the Captain managed to sleep so soundly, especially now that the Omegan's had started targeting the senior officers involved in US nuclear weapons deployment. An Air Force command post in Omaha had been attacked three months ago and a General officer had been killed. A second attack in Alaska almost exactly a month later took out the staff in charge of reconditioning expired air-to-air nuclear weapons. For the first time, US nuclear positive control had been breached. The resulting Broken Arrow had seriously contaminated the base, forcing its evacuation. The third incident had killed the officers responsible for tactical nuclear weapons at Fort Bragg. From the General down to the greenest Second Lieutenant, they'd all been killed in their sleep.

Ramon knew that Patuxent River was an even more tempting target. The tritium in the thermonuclear warheads of the Navy's nuclear torpedoes needed replenishment every few years, and half the weapons were in the midst of their DOT5 upgrade at Patuxent right now. In two weeks, they'd be back at sea.

He forced himself to sit up straight in his chair, trying to stay awake. Chief Petty Officer Pete Swenson had just started his routine contacts with the roving Marine patrols. Everything was quiet. Ramon ran the sensors through their self-test sequences for the tenth time.

Slightly more than half the sensors were up, which was about as good as it got in 2019. He activated the working sensors to run a full rescan of the area. The screens displayed hundreds of tiny targets, all of them far below human threshold.

Relaxing just a little, Ramon leaned back in his chair and sipped his cup of Starbucks. Coffee was one of the few things that hadn't suffered from the Pulse. Once the power had come back on, espresso machines worked as well as ever.

He was glad that his men weren't having as much trouble staying awake as he was. Swenson was eavesdropping on a fox as it worked to root a sleeping rabbit out of its warren. His companion, Petty Officer Second Class Jim Peters, was searching for the bioscan signatures of geese. He owned a shotgun and tomorrow was his day off. Since the Pulse, the government had eliminated any bag limits on subsistence hunting.

Ramon took another sip of his coffee, only to be interrupted by a soft chiming tone from the airborne microwave radar. The computer quickly diagnosed it as a small flock of Canadian geese.

Peters spun around in his chair, grinning. "There goes my dinner, Lieutenant. I bagged two big honkers yesterday morning. My wife roasts a mean bird."

Ramon nodded silently as he watched the geese fly straight over the building, only to disappear directly overhead. The computer searched for patterns from other sensors, and finally concluded the

geese had most likely landed in the cornfield behind the complex to feed.

“That’s where I found them yesterday,” Peters nodded, confirming the computer’s diagnosis. “Too full of dried corn to fly worth a damn.”

The Chief started to write the contact up in his log, only to be interrupted by a more urgent buzz from the Master Threat panel. Sensor #72 was flashing red.

Ramon flipped his Sensor Map to page 72. The sensor in question was attached to a rooftop door. According to the book, that door had been permanently closed. It was made of inch-thick steel and bolted a foot deep into the heavy concrete foundation, its hinges and locking mechanism welded shut. The tactical notes said it would take either a half-kilogram of C4 or two men with cutting torches 1.3 hours to open it.

The sensor light flickered and went out as he stared at it. The Chief reset the master alarm and went back to watching his fox hunt. False alarms were the norm with post-Pulse electronics.

Ramon tried to relax; yet a strange chill crept across his shoulders. He ignored it at first, but it came again. Like someone was creeping up on him. He turned around. Nothing but a blank wall. He laughed at himself. He was in a secure command center. Nobody could get in here without his approval.

Still, the feeling persisted. Was this the primitive instinct that had kept men alive for the last million years? Was it trying to tell him something? He reviewed the tactical situation. First a flock of geese disappeared overhead, and then a vibration sensor triggered just before it failed. Neither event was unusual by itself. He decided it was the combination of events that was bothering him.

"Chief, run another diagnostic on sensor 72."

The Chief typed on his keyboard. "Sensor's definitely offline now, Sir. I'll write it up for Maintenance to replace it in the morning. Probably the wiring again."

"Before you do, check with the rooftop patrol."

The Chief swiveled back around in his chair as he keyed his mike. "Eagle 3, this is CC. We got a vibration sensor on door 72."

"Roger," the radio crackled as the Marine patrol responded. "We think we heard something from that side of the roof. Couple of muted thuds. Barely audible."

"Roger that. You see any geese landing on the roof?"

"Negative. I can hardly see my hand in front of my face up here. New moon."

Ramon's mouth went dry at the report of the audible. The hairs were really standing up on the back of his neck now. He'd read enough Omegan contact reports to know that this was how most attacks started. Malfunctions and vague indications. Some soft

audibles. Then minutes later, after the Omegans had gotten past the outer defenses, all hell would break loose. "I think something is going down, Chief. I'm declaring a Code One."

The Chief started to protest. "Sir, the book says we need a positive..."

"I don't give a damn about the book. First we got a flock of birds that disappear, then a vibration sensor and now an audible. All at the same time in the same place. I'm calling it."

The Chief shrugged and keyed his mike again. "Eagle 3, I need a quick visual on your audible." He glanced doubtfully back at Ramon. "We're probably going Code One."

"Just heard something else," the radio crackled. "Some kind of ringing impact. Then a high-pitched scream." The Marine sounded scared. It was dark and lonely up on the roof.

"Animal? Bird?" the Chief radioed back. A lot of crows had been nesting on the building lately and they made some pretty strange noises when the local cats tried to hunt them.

"More like some kind of blood-sucking vampire bat." The guard was young and he'd been out in the dark too long.

"Just stick to the facts, Eagle 3. Describe the sound."

"Just got it again," the Marine whispered into his mike. "Ringing sound. Sort of like a lead hammer hitting steel."

"You got a visual yet?" the Chief asked.

"Maybe," the Marine breathed into his mike. "Looks like some faint sparks in the direction of the door. Came at the same time as the hammer blows. Too dark to see anything else. I'm moving in to get a better visual."

Ramon cursed the shortage of working night vision goggles, but he couldn't wait. He reached out and punched the alert button to sequence all the cameras to automatic. They'd capture any heat source or motion they detected. Then he picked up the phone and buzzed the Captain's quarters.

The Captain answered on the second ring. "Dexheimer here." His voice sounded alert despite the fact that he'd been sleeping five seconds earlier.

"I've declared a Code One," Ramon said, his voice rising slightly. "We're in a precautionary lockdown. Might be something on the roof."

"You just woke me from a damn fine dream, Lieutenant. Tanya Roberts in that old jungle movie of hers."

"Sorry, Sir." Ramon wasn't amused. He didn't know who Tanya Roberts was, and he didn't like 2D movies anyway.

"Send the Marines down my way, would you, Lieutenant. Kind of lonely down here." The Captain sounded wide-awake but almost bored. Which made sense. He'd spent the last ten years commanding fast attack subs, and captaining a hunter-killer sub took a man with the predatory nature of a wolf and the sleeping habits of a cat. He didn't get excited easily.

Another sensor flickered on, and then went dead. It was the security door one level below the rooftop entrance. The Chief fiddled with the diagnostic, and then shrugged when he found that sensor had gone offline as well.

“Lost another one, Lieutenant. Lousy junk they give us nowadays. I got more sensors down than up tonight.”

“It’s no coincidence, Chief. Omegans are in the building.”

The two Petty Officers shared a secret glance. They’d heard about the Lieutenant’s wacky extraterrestrial theory. That and his obsession with all these security monitors. “Probably just geese and sensor malfunctions, Sir. The wind gets kind of weird up on the roof. Makes these creepy sounds as it blows through the antenna arrays.”

Ramon ignored him. “Where’s the rooftop patrol now?”

The Chief keyed his mike again. “Eagle 3, are you at the door?”

“Roger. Just getting there and...” His mike clicked off.

“Eagle 3?”

The Marine’s excited voice came back. “The door has been breached. I repeat, door 72 is open. Holy shit, I got torn metal and shattered concrete everywhere.”

Ramon keyed his own mike. “Follow them in, Corporal. Lethal force authorized. Omegan profile. Move it.”

“Sir, yes, Sir.” The Marine sounded really scared now. Like every other soldier, he knew that most people who confronted an Omegan



wound up dead. Those few that survived couldn't remember what they'd had for breakfast or what day of the week it was.

"I want all the outside patrols brought inside, Chief," Ramon barked. "Send them down to the Captain's level. We're under attack."

The Chief started barking orders into his mike. Peters flew into action beside him, starting a building sweep, displaying just the anomalies, including bad sensors. His board lit up.

Ramon paced back and forth in front of his console, thoughts racing. My God, it was happening. Right here in Patuxent River. He jumped as the phone rang loudly. It was the Captain's extension.

"What do you have for me, Lieutenant?"

"Contact has entered the building on level 5 and is moving downward, Sir. Definite Omegan signature. Can't tell how many of them. Armed response is in progress." He saw another sensor blink on. "Three security doors have been breached so far. They're descending."

A Marine called in, only to have his voice drowned out by automatic gunfire. The Corporal tried again. He reported briefly engaging a target on the level four. The contact had disappeared after his men had fired on it.

Three more door sensors blink red in rapid succession on level 3. Another patrol called in. "CC, this is Linebacker 2. Single target acquired on level three," the Marine shouted. "Moving too fast to track. We laid down fire, but they went through the floor."

“Repeat that, Linebacker 2.”

“Through the floor, Lieutenant.”

“It’s concrete, Linebacker 2.”

“I’m standing next to a big ass hole here, Lieutenant. Like something dug through it with claws.”

“Get down there, Linebacker 2. It’s headed toward the Captain.”

The Captain was listening on the phone. "Marines are engaging just above my level now, Lieutenant. I can hear automatic fire through the ceiling."

"I've got more help coming, Sir. Three minutes."

The Chief keyed his mike again. "Linebacker 2, are you still engaging the contact?"

"Roger that. We dropped through the hole to level 2. Mother of Jesus, it’s heading down the corridor, moving directly away from us. Shooting out these sparks -- some kind of EMP pulse. Lights are out. Just muzzle flashes to see by. It’s a person, but our bullets aren’t..."

The metallic rattle of a half dozen M-14's drowned out his open mike. Then a long silence. "Target's down, target's down," the Marine finally breathed.

Ramon keyed his own mike. "Stay back, Linebacker 2. Get an M21 in there and fry it. Target is still dangerous. I repeat, target is still capable."

"Jesus," the Marine gasped, "it's just a... a..." His mike suddenly cut-off.

"Linebacker 2, come in. Linebacker 2."

Silence.

"Any more patrols between me and the target?" the Captain asked as he overheard the radio traffic.

"Just stay on the phone, Sir," Ramon replied urgently. "And keep the lights out. I've got an IR camera focused through a hole in the wall behind you. If anything tries to come through your door, just shoot the shit out of it."

"Appreciate the advice, Lieutenant. But all I have is a 9mm and a pitch black room."

The bastard's voice was still calm. The IR camera showed him standing by the bed, his gun pointing steadily toward the door.

"It's O.K, Sir. We loaded it with Teflon rounds. You could shoot through an engine block with those. Besides, nobody is getting through two inches of reinforced steel." He didn't say anything about how fast the Omegans had breached the thinner doors above. Or that concrete floor.

The vibration sensor on door #3 suddenly blinked on. Ramon flipped to page 3, shocked to find that was the Captain's door. How could anyone move that fast?

"Captain, I got a vib sensor on your..." He was cut-off as the phone carried the sound of a loud clanging bang. Then another. Despite being two-hundred meters away and five stories higher, Ramon felt the building shake beneath his feet. He glanced up at the screen to see the Captain holding his hands over his ears.

"Sounds like somebody working on my door with sledgehammers," the Captain shouted over the din. "Big hairy sledgehammers. How thick is this door again?" He finally sounded worried.

"Two inches, Sir. Armor-grade steel plate. A dozen dead bolts go six inches into the concrete. Nothing's going to open that kind of..."

Another pair of ringing blows drowned out Ramon's words. He manually aimed the IR camera at the door, only to see his worst fears confirmed. A series of fist-sized dents had appeared on the inside, each of them glowing red-hot to the infrared imager. Another ringing blow shook the building, and another dent appeared.

Ramon sat back in his chair, astounded. He tried to imagine how hard something would have to hit a door that thick to make dents on the inside. It just wasn't possible. He shook off his amazement and sat back up in his chair. Saving the Captain was all that mattered. "Linebacker 3, where are you?" He radioed urgently to the reinforcing Marine patrol. He switched his display to the cameras in the hallway outside the Captain's quarters. White noise.

“This is Linebacker 3. We're, ah, maybe two minutes away, Lieutenant. M21's are slowing us down.” The soldier was panting into his mike.

“Don't wait for a visual. As soon as you make the corridor, put your M21 on max cycle and lay down fire. Corridor is shielded and fireproof.”

Ramon switched his screen back to the camera in the Captain's quarters. What he saw astounded him. A section of the door was slowly crumpling as five finger-shaped depressions appeared in the thick armor. He stared as the steel gave off a reverberating scream and began to pull away from the frame.

Despite the threat posed by such horrible strength, Ramon felt strangely vindicated. No way an exoskeleton could do that.

Any doubt he had was vanquished forever when four slender fingers slipped through the opening. At the same time, the fingers of the attacker's other hand dug deeper into the middle of the door, index and middle finger tearing all the way through it. He saw a manicured fingernail. What the hell...

The deafening scream of overstressed steel drowned out his thoughts. The Captain dropped his gun and pressed his palms tightly against his ears. Ramon could only stare helplessly as the intruder slowly peeled the thick door back. The attacker finally jerked on the edge of the door, noisily ripping half the dead bolts out of the concrete frame in a shower of sparks. The building shuddered again.

An orange-yellow light shone through the widening gap in the doorframe.

"My wife's name is Carol," the Captain said as the noise briefly subsided. His voice was strangely calm again. "Tell her I was thinking of her at the end."

"It's not the end of any god-damned thing, Captain," Ramon shouted back as he checked the corridor cameras again. The camera was down. "The interdiction patrol is one level above you. ETA one minute."

"Too late. Something's entering."

Ramon stared wide-eyed at the false-color IR image as the intruder exerted themselves again, this time ripping the quarter-ton door off its final hinge in a shower of sparks. It threw the crumpled door down the hallway to land in a horrible din of clanging metal and screaming men. He realized with horror that the attacker had just taken out Linebacker 3.

They had been the Captain's last hope.

Ramon held his breath as a very slender figure stepped into the doorway, its chest blazing so brightly that the IR imager flared into green snow. Ramon quickly turned down the gain, desperately trying to see what was happening.

He stared in wide-eyed fascination as an image slowly formed out of the noise. The intruder was humanoid and very tall. A long, thick braid of hair hung nearly to its waist. The creature had two

slender legs and was barefoot, with very human-looking toes. The center of its chest was glowing like a small sun. Ramon frantically adjusted the camera gain lower yet, and was barely able to image the darker outline of the intruder's body. The manicured fingernail should have prepared him, but his thoughts were still catching up with his eyes.

His screen displayed the unmistakably outline of a woman.

Ramon stabbed his mike button. He knew the Captain would be blinded by the glow. "The intruder's a woman, Sir."

"Jesus Christ," the Captain gasped as he jumped to the side, reaching down at the same time to feel around for his 9mm. His calmness had given way to a hint of panic. He backed up across the dazzlingly lit room, gun in hand, still blinded. "What kind of fucking woman tears open armored doors? Or glows as if she's on fire?"

"Angels. The survivors of other attacks reported seeing angels. Before the amnesia erased everything."

"An angel of fire..." the Captain started to say as he shielded his eyes. "Can't see anything. Too bright."

"Just open fire, Sir. Aim at the light. Put her down."

Ramon heard the chuff, chuff, chuff of the Captain's 9mm firing, accompanied by the metallic clatter of brass casings hitting the concrete floor. The woman paused and took a step backward, gripping the doorframe.

The Captain fired twice more, and two ragged spots appeared low on her stomach. She just stood there as the Captain continued to fire as fast as he could pull the trigger. His bullets rose to strike the intruder's face and head, snapping her head back, sending stray strands of hair flying. She leaned her head forward, her eyes narrowing. The Captain desperately aimed at her lower torso and legs. She crouched down slightly and then leaped directly into the muzzle blast.

The camera tracked her heat signature as two final muzzle blasts lit the narrowing gap between them. She landed inches in front of the Captain and wrapped her arms around him. For all the world it looked as if she was hugging him. A hug that was accompanied by a strangled gasp and then a wet crunch. Ramon swallowed his rising bile as the woman spun around and vanished out the door.

The camera automatically tracked the only remaining heat source in the room. The Captain lay on the floor, his shoulders strangely misshapen and his clothes burning brightly.

"Holy Mother of God," the Chief gasped as he stood beside Ramon, staring into the monitor. "What the fuck did we just see?"

Ramon keyed his mike. "Captain, are you O.K."

No answer.

"Captain?"

Ramon felt nauseous as he punched the buttons on his console, flicking from one camera to another, frantically hoping to get a visual



light image of the intruder. He finally saw a blurred streak going down a hallway, moving faster than should have been possible. The intruder reached the locked fire door at the end, and threw her shoulder against it. It bent outward but didn't yield. The woman paused to come into sharp focus for a fraction of a second. Ramon found himself staring at the longest legs he'd ever seen. That and a mirror-like metallic top that was little more than a leotard, covering her glowing chest and shoulders, leaving her legs and back bare. Her long braid was platinum blonde. She wore some kind of electronic device around her waist.

“Linebacker 4, she's at door SQ4 in corridor 3. Authorizing M21 fire.”

“We got her, Lieutenant,” came the crisp reply of the Marine sergeant. “We're engaging.”

The woman's body was slammed against the door as a hail of Teflon-tipped bullets crashed into her back, the near misses tearing ragged holes through the steel door. Then the plasma rifle flared to life to bathe the end of the corridor in a sea of atomic light.

The CCD imager of the visual light camera flared blindingly as it burned out. Ramon switched to a hardened IR camera, turning the gain as low as it would go. The corridor looked like the inside of a blast furnace. The steel walls were glowing white-hot and sagging inward from the blast. The fire door was completely gone.

There was no sign of the woman.

“Target’s down, I mean gone,” Linebacker 4 gasped into his mike. “Vaporized. We got to back off. Too hot.”

Ramon heard a couple of the men cheering over the open mike. He was about to join them when a sensor lit up in the next core. His heart leaped into his throat. That was impossible! Nothing on Earth could withstand an M21 burst.

His words echoed in his head. *Nothing on Earth. Nothing on Earth.*

His worst fears were all coming true.

“Linebacker 4, I need you to find another way toward the front entrance. I’ve got more sensor reports in the Admin block.”

“No way, Lieutenant. Nothing alive between us and there. We gotta go around anyway. Whole fucking corridor is melting down.”

Another cluster of vibration sensors triggered near the main entrance. Ramon punched up the closest camera, but it was just a sea of static. She was still alive, and she was taking the cameras down as she went.

He stabbed for the button that triggered the EMP-hardened cameras he’d hidden just outside the front entrance. The link to his remote database began to pump gigabytes of image data outside the facility.

He keyed his mike again. “Who’s still outside the building?”

“Eagle 1,” a crisp voice reported.

“Get ready. Target is coming through the main entrance. Female humanoid. Fire everything you’ve got. M21 release authorized.” He prayed that Eagle 1 had one of the remaining plasma rifles.

“Yes, Sir,” the Marine replied. “We’re ready.” He paused. “But did you say female?”

“Affirmative. She killed the Captain. Take her down.”

Ramon turned and punched up an outside camera that was located fifty yards back from the entrance. The front of the building looked normal. He blinked, and in that fraction of a second, the entire front of the building exploded outward. Torn steel and shattered glass flew halfway across the parking lot, cutting down several of the Marines.

The woman emerged from the flying debris, her body glowing a violent bluish-white from head to toe. She bent low, and then leaped from the ground just as the Marines opened fire. M-14 and M-18 rounds tore supersonic holes through the space she’d just been occupying, ripping more holes in the building. Then an M21 gave off its trademark sizzling pop as it shot a bolt of pure death into the air.

Ramon switched to an upward-looking camera just in time to see the bolt converging on the target about two hundred meters overhead.

The night sky exploded.

All the computers in the console sizzled and smoked as a riot of sparks filled the control room. His screen went black.

“EMP burst!” the Chief shouted unnecessarily. “A big one.”

The overhead lights flickered and failed over to emergency lighting. The stench of ozone and burned computer circuitry was suddenly thick, making the men cough. They grabbed for their respirators.

It was then that Ramon remembered the amnesia drug. It was probably already in the AirCon system.

“Get your masks on fast,” he shouted to his men. “Closed cycle breathing.” He pulled his on first and switched his breather to recirculation mode.

The Petty Officer who was closest to the door turned slowly to look back at him with a glazed look in his eyes. “An angel. We just saw an angel.” He seemed puzzled by his own words as his expression slowly turned blank.

Behind Ramon, the Chief took a deep breath and slowly collapsed, a look of rapture on his face. He was still holding his mask in his hand. He was breathing hard, his face flushed. Like he was in ecstasy.

Pheromones, Ramon quickly concluded. They’d been hypothesized in earlier attacks. Probably mixed with whatever that psychoactive amnesia drug was.

He staggered across the room toward the emergency exit, holding his breath inside the respirator until he saw spots forming in front of his eyes. He frantically tore open the emergency exit and

stumbled out onto the fire escape. His lungs burned for lack of air. He got up and fell again, ignoring the bruises as he half ran and half fell down the metal stairs. He picked himself up at the bottom and ran upwind, away from the building. He ran until his vision slowly faded from lack of oxygen.

He had to avoid the drugs.

He wanted to remember.

He wanted to remember everything.

## Chapter Two

*Tuesday, October 22, 2019 4:23am, Patuxent River Naval Air Station, Maryland*

Major Tala Laut cursed her bad luck as she tried to stay airborne. Her chest burned horribly. Her Aur'a'lenz was overheated from her exertions. Even worse, her EMP generator had detonated like a bomb when that second energy burst had hit her. The explosion had nearly knocked her out of the air. She was stinging from head to toe from the bullets, and her back was so incredibly hot that her head was swimming.

What the hell had they shot her with? A Terran energy weapon? They didn't exist.

But there was no other explanation. The blast wasn't explosive, yet it had propelled her through the fire door to land upside down fifty feet away. No, that wasn't quite right. The door wasn't there any more. When she looked back into that nuclear hell, the metal walls were drooping and melting. She made it to the front entrance, and dove through it, only to have that second burst take her in mid-air, detonating her shielded EMP unit. The secondary explosion would have badly damaged the building if she'd still been inside.

She turned her head and looked down at herself. Her back and legs were glowing white hot, and her skin had started to take on that

dangerous liquid metal glow. It was worse than she'd feared. Her cellular structure was about to break down. If that happened with her skin this hot, there would be nothing left of her but ionized gas.

Suddenly frightened, Tala tried to swallow, only to have her tongue stick to the roof of her mouth. She gagged and struggled to breathe. Most of the moisture had been boiled out of her body. Her heart ached with every beat. Her blood was the consistency of molasses by now. If it got much thicker, it wouldn't circulate and she'd be dead.

She had to cool off. Just as importantly, she had to get some liquid in her.

That's when she remembered the river. She'd flown only inches above the dark water as she approached the building. But where was it now? She looked down, but her eyes were too full of bright sparks to see in the darkness. The only thing she could make out was the glow of her body as it reflected from car windshields a half mile beneath her. Then that started to fade as well. Black spots were blotting out her vision. Another bad sign. She wasn't going to be alive five minutes from now if she didn't find the river.

The water would be a dark line, no lights. She tried to see through the gathering spots, looking for darkness, but the black spots turned everything into a blur. Then she saw a faint reflection below her. It traveled with her for a few seconds before disappearing.

The river?

She didn't have time to investigate. She arched her body like a high-diver and reversed direction. The reflection came into view again. She aimed herself at it, stretching herself out like a high diver.

She was diving at four hundred miles per hour when she plunged into a very shallow body of water. Her hands and face slammed into the shallow bottom, the blow traveling painfully down her back as her body crumpled up. She must have been knocked out for a few seconds, because she suddenly woke up gagging on dirty water. Her mouth was full of bits of shattered tile and concrete. She coughed up a lungful of the same stuff as she tried to swallow some cleaner water. Drinking was more important than breathing at the moment, but the water was suddenly gone. She was enveloped in a steam bubble. She thrust herself forward, trying to get out of it and find some cool water. She had to twist herself around to break through the boiling water that surrounded the bubble. She found the bottom. It was made of small tiles. She'd fallen into a pool, not the river.

It didn't matter. It was wet. She gagged down as much of the pool water as she could swallow, ignoring the fact that it was full of chemicals and got knows what kind of organics. She tasted urine and sweat and sun tan oil. It didn't matter. It all came back up. Her steam belch was anything but ladylike, but it cooled her insides and started to restore her water balance. She followed the sloping floor toward cooler water. The pool was thankfully large and deep.



Her first thought when she could think clearly again was that she'd screwed up. Bad. She was Commander of the pacification force, supposedly here to set an example for her people, and she'd screwed up.

Damn it.

The situation was all the worse because First-Major Hel'stend had personally asked her to neutralize Patuxent River. More than that, he'd asked her to do it by the book. That meant alone.

The woman who would normally lead an assault like this was Ayla; her second in command. But she'd sent Ayla up to the ship to meet with the First-Major. After her excessive behavior at the American Army base in Texas, killing all of the officers involved in their nuclear weapons program, not just the most senior ones, Tala had signed her up for retraining. Ayla interpreted it as an insult and as censure. It was definitely the later. The First-Major said he'd handle it personally. Which really meant he was going to chew her butt out. Personally.

Ayla's departure left Tala temporarily in charge of the security team. She cursed her stubborn insistence on taking out Patuxent on her own. Ayla had offered to send a couple of her operatives with her, but Tala had refused. This was supposed to be a textbook example to the rest of Ayla's team on how to do it right. An example about how to use the minimum force necessary to ensure success. The minimum personnel. The minimum casualties.

The First-Major's definition of success.

That was a joke now. Instead of the Operational Excellence she endlessly preached to her people, she'd barely made it far enough inside the facility to take out the lone senior officer. She hadn't gotten anywhere near the weapons before the Terrans hit her with that god-awful weapon.

Even worse, she feared they might have captured her image. She'd been zapping cameras left and right all through the building, but what if they'd hidden some hardened ones in the walls? That really worried her. A Shaadar's picture in the hands of the US military would be just the kind of thing that would give Ayla a shot at her job.

Ayla would already be working on the First-Major, and given her heavy concentration of Velorian genes, and the pheromones that came with them, it didn't take much imagination to know where that meeting might go. Tala had never engaged in that kind of fraternization. She'd gotten where she was by hard work and competence.

Competence that would now be questioned.

Damn it.

Even worse, the planet-side security operatives all respected Ayla. She fought besides them every day. Several of her people openly distrusted the mission. They'd heard rumors from other worlds. Rumors about betrayals. If they were to be believed, the Pactel didn't always play fair.

Ayla, of course, had defended her actions in Texas by claiming that the Terran defenses were getting better. They had to hit the Normals harder and faster, without regard to casualties. It was the only way to avoid being identified.

Tala hadn't listened to her. She didn't want to hear the message. The pacification effort was already too messy. Too many Terran casualties. This was supposed to be a surgical operation. It was starting to resemble a war.

Unfortunately, nobody in Command had guessed that the Terrans would have so many different military forces. Their Intel should have been excellent after all those years of surveillance. Yet she'd been forced into taking out the military leadership of literally hundreds of forces. That meant neutralizing thousands of senior officers. It was taking time, and the Pactel were getting impatient.

Tala curled herself into a ball at the bottom of the pool, her thoughts growing darker by the minute. She'd always been her own worst critic after a failure. Her scathing self-castigation sometimes turned into depression. She couldn't afford that luxury.

She debated going back and finishing the job at Patuxent. But that would mean facing that energy weapon again. Two different ones had hit her. They probably had more. Even worse, the base would be on full alert now, and men who'd been outside the range of the Myst'al drug or her pheromones would already be converging on the attack site. She'd trained her people to never return to the same site,

and she wasn't going to worsen an already embarrassing and dangerous situation by breaking Ops now.

She replayed the attack in her thoughts, trying to figure out where she'd gone wrong. It had started off textbook clean. But she'd known they were on to her the minute she got inside. Somehow, they'd known she was coming. And what she was. Those special bullets had stung so badly that she'd barely been able to think, and then those energy weapons. They hadn't been armed to stop terrorists.

They were gunning for Shaadar.

No, that was impossible. No Terran knew who they were. It was just luck. Bad luck for her.

Tala's thoughts raced from one end of the spectrum to the other as she waited impatiently for her skin temperature to drop back to normal. She kept drinking the pool water until she felt like she was going to burst.

She was bloated but cool when she used her Aur'al strength to leap from the bottom of the ten-foot deep pool. She burst through the surface in a cloud of spray, and accelerated as fast as she could, hoping to avoid any eyes.

She was five miles high in less than a minute. Still dripping wet, her skin started to ice up as she soared through the sub-freezing air of the lower stratosphere. A shiver ran down her back, replacing the

burning glow. She flew faster, hoping the air friction would warm her. Too hot, too cold. Earth was such an unpleasant planet.

Her thoughts raced ahead faster than her body could. She started to plan how she was going to handle this back in LA. Clearly, Lydia had screwed up the briefing. Major Lydia Andren'son was in charge of Tactics and Intelligence. According to her, Patuxent River should have been a typical American command center. Thinly armored doors, a handful of guards with assault rifles, and sensors that could easily be blinded with an EMP burst.

Then it hit her. Her stomach clenched in a knot as she suddenly remembered seeing Lydia and Ayla together at a nightclub in LA recently. They'd gone dancing. With each other. Normally that wouldn't be a problem. There weren't many Shaadarian men in her team and sexual mores on Shaadar mostly came from their Velorian ancestors. Gender bending was the norm. But maybe there was more to it than that. Maybe Lydia and Ayla had become lovers.

Maybe Lydia had deliberately downplayed her briefing, hoping that she'd fail.

No. Lydia would never hide anything like this. She and Lydia had worked together ever since they'd arrived in Sol space. She was dedicated to the mission.

On the other hand, Ayla had tried to interfere with her staff before. She'd tried to pull Januk into her team instead of having him

work as Geneva's control down in Washington. She'd been working on the First-Major for months.

Such were Tala's troubled thoughts as she leveled off seven miles high. She pushed herself hard, only to feel her energy reserves fading. She'd need to thumb a ride home pretty soon.

She let two small airliners pass beneath her before spotting the lumbering United Airlines Airbus A380. It was one of the few planes that had a large enough APU exhaust to give her a comfortable hidey-hole for the ride home. She tucked her arms against her sides and clenched her fists, concentrating on flying fast enough to catch up with it.

The antigrav embedded in her pelvis, her Aer'ie, filled her lower body with a tingling glow as she flew faster than her own shock wave. She closed on the lumbering jet, struggling through its wake turbulence until she could reach out and grab the edges of the cold tailpipe. As usual, the APU was shut down during cruise.

She climbed inside the cramped space, her nose wrinkling at the stench of kerosene. She tried to breathe through her mouth as she huddled up against the still warm turbine wheel. Looking back out the tailpipe, she saw only stars.

This was far different than her First Class trip out here from LA. The tailpipe was sixty below zero and horribly noisy and drafty, with air too thin to draw much oxygen from. But the plane was going her way and it was faster than returning to the First Class lounge at

Dulles and changing back into her street clothes. She was in no condition to be seen in public anyway, what with only a few shreds of her silver uniform hanging from her shoulders.

She closed her eyes tightly and sighed. She imagined the people sitting so comfortably inside the cabin ahead of her, eating their meals and watching movies. Warm people. She started to shiver more violently as her Aur'a faded. Mostly, she envied the warm blankets that the passengers were snuggling into. She'd flown trans-Pacific a couple of times during her early reconnaissance of Earth, First Class of course, and had thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Much nicer than the sterile spaces of a Shaadarian survey ship and its military rations. And with space travel measured in months and years, a fourteen-hour airplane ride wasn't bad at all.

Not everyone was so appreciative. Ayla had never shown any patience for Terran aircraft. Unfortunately, very few Shaadar could fly for more than a thousand miles under their own power -- two hours at the Mach and their Aer'ie would be depleted. It was a lot further than that between the two charging stations: one in LA and the other in Tel Aviv.

Ayla would never understand, for it was her good fortune to have been born with the flight powers of a Velorian. She could also metabolize Orgone -- a very rare trait among the Shaadar. When in their Aur'a, most Shaadarians were strong enough to go toe to toe

with a Velorian, at least for a few minutes. But Ayla could maintain that fiction longer. Hours. Maybe even days.

Tala would never admit it, but she envied Ayla. Ayla could navigate halfway around the planet in an hour, using a suborbital hop, just like the ancient Vels were reputed to have done. Instead, she had to curl up in this stinky tailpipe for hours on end.

She closed her eyes as her Aur'a finally faded completely away. The thin air made her sleepy, but at least sleep would make the journey go quickly. She'd used far too much energy during the penetration and she was going to have to recharge as soon as she got to LA. She'd have to exit the APU high over LA to avoid being seen, and the last thing she wanted was to free-fall into her own swimming pool. That would really be embarrassing.

Sleep didn't come. Her thoughts still raced. Should she have let Ayla take out Patuxent River her way? She would have killed all the officers and torn the nuclear weapons apart, contaminating a huge area. But she wouldn't have gone alone. And nobody would have survived to report on anything. What were a few more dead Terrans anyway?

Tala angrily pushed her doubts away. No, Earth was not a battlefield. Terrans were intelligent beings. They'd come here to cull only their violent leaders. Not to start a war.

Her teeth started to chatter as she curled up like a cat, trying to draw some residual warmth from the engine core. Calling upon the



mental disciplines of her Order, she finally managed to blank her mind and fall asleep. She was in REM stage five minutes later, her hands clenching tightly into fists. She was dreaming about what she was going to say to Lydia when she got back LA.

It was a troubled but strangely satisfying dream.

## Chapter Three

*Wednesday, October 23, 2019 7:45am, Pentagon, Washington*

Ramon sat in a borrowed office in the south quad of the Pentagon. He was studying the images he'd captured at Patuxent River. He had a full five seconds of video that had been taken after the Omegan had burst through the front entrance – taken just before the camera had been wiped out by that EMP burst. His gigabyte link had managed to get the real-time video off-site. He also had two visible light stills, including one taken a split second before the M21 had melted down the corridor. It was razor sharp, showing the Omegan in full profile. And of course, he had the IR footage from the Captain's cabin.

Everything was going to change now. The Joint Chiefs would finally listen. They'd been looking for a target, and he was going to give them one. The Omegans weren't androids as the most imaginative analyst in the CIA had surmised. Nor were they soldiers in armored exoskeletons like the military believed. Not slit-eyed alien reptiles or bugs either. He left that one for the tabloids. What they were, were humans. Clearly a better kind of human, but still cousins of *Homo Sapiens*. There was no possible way that parallel evolution could have resulted in two races that were so identical in appearance.

Four thousand years of Earth's history suddenly made sense to him. Starting with the ancient writings of the Egyptians, the Mayans,

the Greek's, the Roman's, all the way up to the Norse. Eastern mythology as well. It suddenly fit into a very neat pattern.

The ancients had called them gods, sometimes angels, even demons. Many other terms as well. They'd been worshipped, despised, loved and hated. But always feared.

His eyes were open now. All that mythology was based on ancient contact reports with extraterrestrial beings. Unfortunately, subsequent translators hadn't believed in Zeus or Aphrodite, or any of a hundred other deities that men had worshiped over the eons. Modern religions had since migrated to a one God scenario. In their attempts at interpretation, the translators, most of them Christian Monks, had interpreted the contact reports as legends and ultimately turned the whole history of extraterrestrial contact into so much pagan mythology.

Without realizing what they'd done, those well-meaning men had hidden the most important knowledge that humans could ever have known. That we are not alone. That there are others like us. There are beings out there who are either made in our image, or us in theirs.

Most importantly of all, they'd failed in the most basic of missions. They'd not warned future generations that the wandering children of Earth might someday return.

Unfortunately, Earth's lost gods seemed to have returned with an agenda that included methodically murdering the planet's military

leaders. They killed men and women in their sleep merely because of the rank they wore. There was nothing in previous writing that suggested the gods had displayed this kind of behavior before.

Gods.

No, he couldn't use that word in his reports. Humans were too proud today to accept that there were beings who deserved to be worshipped. Maybe the one God, but no other. And the Omegans certainly weren't asking to be worshipped. They were culling the Earth of anyone who practiced organized violence.

They were begging for a fight.

But why?

Was this was some misguided mission of peace, some pacification attempt to cull the violent nature of Terran *Homo Sapiens*? Or more ominously, the first phase of a war of the worlds? Clearly they knew that Earth's military forces couldn't fight without leaders. They'd also know that humans wouldn't just give up. Violence begot violence. Wars had started over far less.

All Ramon knew for sure was that there hadn't been a credible sighting of extraterrestrials interacting this openly with normal humans since the legends of the Valkyries. Assuming you believed that one. But there had been plenty of flying saucer sightings and abduction tales since then. Unfortunately, even fewer people took those seriously.

Ramon picked up the fire door picture to study it closer. The woman even looked like what a Valkyrie was supposed to look like. A blonde goddess, tall and athletic. Then he thought of the way she'd torn through those steel doors, not to mention the casual way she'd shrugged off his Teflon bullets and even survived that god-awful M21 burst. The way she'd crushed the Captain to death in her arms. The pathology report had been pretty morbid. That wasn't how he imagined his goddesses.

No, the Omegans were just warriors. The killers of Terrans.

He shivered at that last thought. The bone tiredness of two days without sleep was catching up to him, making it hard to think clearly. He closed his eyes as his head nodded. He jerked, catching himself at the edge of falling asleep. He blinked his eyes, desperately trying to stay awake. He focused on an old poster that was hanging in a glass display case across the room. Written in French, faded and crumbling, it looked like some kind of recruitment ad for female soldiers. It was titled *Paix des Femmes*. Roughly translated, it meant *Women of Peace*.

The phrase intrigued him. Female warriors, sent to cull the violent members of a society? Perhaps whoever had sent them felt that women would be less likely to engage in open warfare, more content to work behind the scenes. Was it possible for an enemy to be that deliberate?

An even bigger question was whether peace could be gained by assassination of military leaders. Or did that just create anarchy? Did it open the door for less skillful and less disciplined leaders to take over?

The phone rang to startle him back to full wakefulness. It was the Admiral's secretary. She said it was time.

Ramon quickly gathered his documents and stuffed them into his oversized brief case. There was only one thing that could stop the Omegans, and that was knowledge.

The knowledge he had in his hands.

And in a few moments, the most important military leaders on the planet would have it too.

## **Chapter Four**

*Wednesday, October 23, 2019 10:15am, Pentagon, Washington*

Admiral Frank Sanders said nothing as the Navy Lieutenant ended his briefing and left the room. The young officer had just presented compelling evidence that Stafford Labs had been right all along. Stafford was a DOD think tank, and they'd been claiming for months that the Omegans couldn't possibly be part of a Middle Eastern terrorist group. No matter how many Japanese engineers and scientists they employed, no matter how much oil money they poured into it, no matter how much Chinese genetic engineering or Russian cyber-armor they bought, they could never have defeated the world's military forces for three years without a single casualty.

Stafford Labs also claimed that the spectrum of the high-altitude bursts back in 2016 had been carefully tailored to maximize EMP with no physical damage to the ground. The Russians had developed weapons that could do that, and so had the US. But they were all accounted for. The handful of physicists who knew how to create that specific kind of thermonuclear weapon were either dead or working for the US.

All but one. Alex Sockalin had disappeared into the Middle East in 1995. It was solely his disappearance that kept the AI Amid theory alive.

Now this rank and file Lieutenant had shown up with photographs that proved they were dealing with some kind of superhuman being. He claimed they were extraterrestrials.

Sanders wasn't ready to buy into that, not yet anyway. But clearly these Omegans had access to a working knowledge of physics that eclipsed the wildest dreams of Terran scientists. Probably some kind of forcefield around their bodies. Physics that pushed the boundaries of the most speculative of science fiction.

Sanders cleared his voice as he looked up at the other Chiefs. "Well, gentleman, at least we know what our enemy looks like."

"That was the biggest crock of shit I've ever seen," General John Abrams snorted. "I don't know what your people are trying to pull here, Admiral."

"The battle damage at Patuxent is consistent with other attacks, General. You saw the video."

"If I started to believe that some woman could do that," he pointed to the picture of the mangled door to Captain Dexheimer's cabin, "and then fly away, then I'd be even crazier than that nutcase Lieutenant of yours."

General Frederick Dickens twirled his gold pen through his fingers. "I don't know, John. It suddenly adds up. My boys have been trying to stop these Omegans ever since the Saudi war, and all we have is dead soldiers and fried electronics. Carruther's people have come up with nothing but a bunch of wild theories. The scenarios



from Stafford Labs come fairly close to what the Lieutenant has surmised.” He turned to the thin, graying man beside him. “What’s NSA’s take on the authenticity of the video footage?”

Max Englebrecht finished reading the report that an aide had just placed in front of him. He was new at the NSA. His last job had been acting CIA Director before John Carruthers filled the post.

He closed the report and took off his glasses, taking a long moment to rub his eyes before looking up. “The analysts say the video looks unaltered, Fred. But the Intel guys can’t begin to explain what’s on it.”

“Unaltered?” Abrams retorted. “Ever since they gave up using real actors in Hollywood ten years ago, nobody knows what’s real or not. People can’t tell digital images from photography.”

“My people can,” Englebrecht replied calmly. “There are lots of distinguishing differences when you look closely at the frame boundaries. Even more, the imaging elements of these cameras were damaged, and you can see the distortions in the images.”

“So you’re buying all this extraterrestrial crap?” Abrams asked in amazement.

“I buy that the Lieutenant photographed someone completely extraordinary. But then, we’ve known we’ve been dealing with extraordinary persons ever since these Omegans appeared. If not for that M21 burst, I’d have stayed with our older theory about techno-

terrorists and body armor. But no material made on Earth can withstand that kind of heat.”

The Chiefs had all seen the M21 demos a few months earlier. The plasma was so hot that it melted armor like butter in a hot July sun. Ferro-concrete turned into lava.

“We're not talking material,” Sanders added. “We're talking about a woman. A very attractive woman, I might add. That creature,” he paused to glance at the still picture again, putting on his glasses to read the spectral analysis numbers on the accompanying slide, “that woman’s back was heated to 5300 degrees centigrade. She ignited the furniture and woodwork in the lobby just by running through it.” He lowered his glasses. “Yet she was still combat effective, gentleman. And don’t forget that she killed eighteen of my men, including my best special weapons officer.”

“There has to be another explanation,” Abrams said.

“Maybe. But right now, this is the best we have.”

“Even if I were to buy all this,” Abrams grunted, “how can this pile of crap help us?”

Sanders stood up to walk closer to the screen. “Lets just go with it and see where it takes us. We’ve got nothing else to work with.”

Abrams shrugged. “So its extraterrestrials now, huh. Well, I guess they’d need to have some kind of base or landing site. It would take a horrific amount of energy to operate from space.”

“That’s a start,” Sanders smiled.

“If so, then we can nuke the shit out of it,” Dickens offered cheerfully. “My boys can hit anyplace on Earth in 24 hours. Or half the planet in 30 minutes if we use an ICBM.”

Englebrecht shook his head. “They would realize that as well. I’m betting they are right here in the middle of us. Hell, maybe right here in Washington. After all, they know exactly who and where each of our senior officers is. That takes inside information.”

“Someone inside the Pentagon?”

“Not necessarily,” Englebrecht replied. “You’d have to figure out where that kind of information is held in your organizations. Probably a few places. We should check out the people who have access.”

“Either way you look at it, we’re at the top of their target list,” Dickens said softly.

The Chiefs shared some quick worried glances. They were brave men, all distinguished in combat. But they weren’t prepared to fight this kind of war. One targeted at them personally.

“Well, we’ve been lucky so far,” Englebrecht continued. “The Brits lost all their Generals. The French and Germans too. It was even worse in Asia. They went halfway down the chain of command. There’s not much left of the North Korean military.”

“Thank God for small favors.”

"Favors my ass," Abrams growled. "For the last three months, all the fucking attacks have been on American territory. What we're doing hasn't slowed them down worth a shit. We're going to wind up like the Brits."

Englebrecht stood up. "You're wrong, General. We aren't going to let them destroy our military leadership. But to save the military, I have to get you out of the line of fire." He took a sheet of paper out of his briefcase and handed it to Sanders. "As of this moment, this is no longer a military fight, gentleman. The President signed the order three hours ago. This is now an agency project."

"Oh, Jesus. The CIA is going to sort this out?" Abrams sneered. "What makes you think they can do what my men can't?"

"They can survive for one. They aren't on the Omegan target list. And it's inter-agency. FBI, CIA and NSA."

"What makes you think that the Omegans won't fix that?" Sanders asked softly.

"We've also got Project Archangel well under way," Englebrecht said slowly. "You've seen the demos. The Chinese and Russian genetics programs might have gotten all the publicity, negative publicity I remind you, but we had most of the real technology all along."

"Unproven technology," Sanders said as he leaned back in his chair.

"You want to match your genetically confused kids up against that? Your chimeras," Abrams asked incredulously, nodding at Sanders. He tossed the picture of the alien blasting through the front door of Patuxent across the table. "If this woman is what that Lieutenant claims, a superbeing, then your kids won't last two minutes in a fight."

"I agree. They aren't ready. But Archangel has many other assets. And this fight isn't going to be over next month. This might just be in the first wave."

"It might be the last if they wipe out all our weapons. We can't even slow them down."

Engelbrecht picked up the remote control for the overhead projector. He switched it on. "That's where you're wrong. What you don't know is that one of our AWACS2's was overhead at the time of the attack. Looking back through the data buffers, we found a faint radar track from the alien as she climbed out of the sub base. It matches a very intense IR trace picked up by a Ramos satellite." The projector displayed a multi-sensor map of Maryland. The track was highlighted in red.

"So we can see them on radar," Dickens shrugged. "And that bitch was definitely hot enough to see from orbit."

"What the track shows is that she climbed a half mile high and traveled about the same distance overland before free-falling into the base swimming pool. When my men got over there this morning, the

bottom was cracked and what water was left was hot enough to scald them."

"So she needed to cool off a bit," Sanders shrugged. "But I would have guessed she'd use the river."

"That's my point," Engelbrecht said. "The river was actually closer to the target site than the pool. She didn't fly to the pool on purpose, she fell into it. Your M21 brought her down, Admiral. Just not right away."

"So, they can be hurt?"

"Apparently. They'll adapt, Admiral, but it's a hopeful sign. They aren't invulnerable, just very tough. It's something the members of Project Archangel can take comfort in."

"Before that bitch wrings all your necks," Dickens said. "Do you have any idea how much raw strength it takes to distort steel armor like that?"

"Admiral, a wiser man than me once said: even a single mouse can turn a herd of elephants. It isn't size or strength that shapes reality, but rather knowledge and perceptions. Elephants are terrified of mice, even though they can stomp them flat. We have to find something the Omegans are afraid of."

"I don't like playing the role of the mouse," Abrams grunted as he picked up the picture again. "Or being stomped flat. But what I really don't understand is why any race would make their warriors look like that?"

“We don’t know how they evolved,” Englebrecht mused. “Maybe we’re just their weak, ugly cousins.”

“Bullshit,” Dickens grunted. “I’m not ready to buy that Earth isn’t where humans evolved. This is moving way too fast. But if I was a betting man, and we all are, I’ll bet someone seriously mucked around in their genes, much like those Archangel kids.”

“As opposed to in her jeans,” Abrams quipped.

Englebrecht ignored the last comment. “It isn’t their size or power that we’ll exploit, gentlemen, but rather how confident they are of their superiority. I’m betting they have more than their share of pride. They’ll be overconfident. That will be our weapon.”

“I’d prefer more M21’s,” Dickens said. “But you’ll get anything you want from my boys.”

Englebrecht nodded. “Thank you, General. But I’ll need everyone’s full support.”

“What I have left,” General Abrams shrugged, “is all yours.”

“Good. We’ll start by briefing a few key Senators. The ones with loose lips.”

Sanders looked up sharply. “How does that help?”

“My people think the Omegans want to stay undercover, so they’ll try to stop anyone who threatens to reveal too much about them. And when they do, we’ll be able to ID them and follow them back to their base or nest or whatever they have.”

Sanders looked uncomfortable. “You’re risking the life of a Senator, Englebrecht. Did the President authorize that too? Or maybe only if he was a Democrat?”

Englebrecht sat down heavily in his chair. “This isn't political, Admiral. And I don't like it any more than you do.” He looked left and right down the long table, meeting each of their gazes. “But we live in desperate times, gentleman. We’re dealing with hostile extraterrestrials. We need to make some bold moves. We might be saving billions of lives.”

No one said anything for a long moment. The phrase ‘hostile extraterrestrials’ hung heavy in the air. They’d never expected to hear such words spoken in this room.

Sanders broke the silence by standing to shake Englebrecht’s hand. “Whatever you need, Max, just ask. We’re behind you all the way.”



## Chapter Five

*Saturday, November 9, 2019 11:45pm, Washington, DC*

Geneva Somers' cell phone rang just as the elevator doors opened into the lobby of the Four Season's hotel. She stepped from the elevator to stroll barefoot across the polished marble floor, her high heels dangling in her left hand, her purse over her bare shoulder. Surprisingly for this time of night, the crowded lobby was filled with business people and government officials. Everyone was dressed in black tie formal and evening gowns.

A hush came over the huge lobby as people turned to look toward the elevators. Geneva paused as she fished in her purse for her phone, giving her unexpected audience a moment to assuage their curiosity. She could feel their stares even before she looked back up. When she did, she ignored everyone's eyes but one. Darien James. The doorman.

He smiled back at her, his brown eyes bright. He'd always enjoyed watching her making her entrances and exits, and he'd pointed out important persons to her on several occasions. Potential clients.

Darien quickly decided that Geneva was as beautiful tonight as he'd ever seen her. Her skin glowed like burnished gold beneath her white body dress. The expensive fashion hugged her slender figure, emphasizing breasts that rode high and proud on her chest. She was one of the best-endowed women he'd seen, yet her breasts sat

perfectly round and firm despite their obvious lack of any support. He'd meant to ask her who her surgeon was. He had to be the best in the business.

He watched Geneva walk across the lobby as he opened the door for an older couple. An angry wife with husband in tow. Anger was a predictable response for women when Geneva was in the room. Especially given the way their men stared at her.

Geneva's dress wrapped tightly around her remarkably tall figure, tight as a second skin across her flat stomach, rising across her chest to close with a diamond-studded choker. Her shoulders and arms were tanned and bare. Downward, her dress flared softly across athletically firm hips to end with a stylishly torn and ragged hemline. Her legs were both slender and tightly muscled. A runner's legs. The longest legs Darien had ever seen.

Geneva tossed her nearly waist-length blonde hair over her shoulders as she keyed a code into her phone. The crowd parted silently in front of her, the men staring unabashedly, everyone's heart pounding, a sound only she could hear. Smiling to herself, Geneva realized she'd chosen this exotic outfit well. It emphasized the fact that she was six feet one in her bare feet.

Her eyes sparkled aquamarine blue and crystalline. Like a child's eyes, or so some men had told her. Her fresh face was slightly broad and strong looking, Nordic in shape, with dimpled cheeks that managed to maintain a hint of girlish innocence in an otherwise

mature face. Her platinum hair shone like white gold as it flowed silkily with every step.

Darien took it all in, just like he had so many times before. Men who were already accompanied by beautiful women held their breath. Wives and girlfriend's eyes narrowed as they dissected Geneva with surgical precision, slicing away her clothing to find only hated perfection beneath. She was as flawless as a Cartier diamond, her complexion smooth, and her eyelashes long. Her full lips and cheeks shimmered despite the lack of gloss or makeup. Her nails were manicured to perfection. Her golden skin literally exuded a glow of sun-loving healthiness. She left a faint scent of freshly cut flowers in her wake.

Darien opened the door for her. "Good evening, my Lady Geneva," he said with a little bow. "You're looking particularly stunning tonight."

Geneva spun around to model the dress. "You like, Darien? A Prado original."

"And worth a veritable fortune," Darien added with a teasing wink. "Just like you, my lady."

She laughed as he looked away just long enough to whistle for a cab. She rested her hand on his shoulder as she bent down to slip her heels on. Her head was still tilted to hold her phone against her shoulder. It was still playing some ethereal David Arkenstone number from the turn of the century.

Darien James' heart melted the same way it did every time Geneva stood next to him. He'd worked the door of the exclusive Four Seasons for twenty years, yet he'd never seen a woman with a fraction of Geneva's unearthly beauty. Yet unlike other beautiful women, her smile was sincere and unaffected. She always paused to acknowledge his simple service.

They'd formed a strange bond in the last months, almost like friends, despite the fact that they met only briefly at the door a few times a week. During those brief moments when she rested her hand on his shoulder, her fragrant hair falling softly across his cheek, he was no longer an invisible man. For those few heart-stopping seconds, the cares of the entire universe evaporated.

The music suddenly stopped as a woman's voice came on the phone. Geneva frowned as she listened. "You know I'm done for the evening, love," she replied. She looked up to wink at Darien. Like any experienced doorman, he knew exactly how she made her living.

"Sorry, but we've got the big one your hubby has been looking for, my dear," her agent said. "It came in with that code name thingy. Mr. Wiggins?"

Geneva's hand tightened painfully on Darien's shoulder as she paused with shoe in hand. Januk had told her to be alert for that name. "Damn it, not tonight, Cheryl. Where is he?"

"Ritz-Carlton. His wife's out of town and the poor boy is lonely."

Geneva sighed as she finished putting her shoe on. She straightened up. Standing now at six feet four in her heels, she was a half-foot taller than Darien. "You know tomorrow is our anniversary."

"But it's still today, Geneva dear. And this is the priority code that your dear hubby gave us."

A cab swerved wildly out of the traffic to enter the circular hotel driveway. It stopped in front of her, the cabbie leering. Geneva's fingers drifted down Darien's arm to briefly hold his hand. She bent her long legs to slip through the cab door. Darien had that dreamy look in his eyes when she looked up to smile her thanks. He winked and closed the door before giving the driver a little salute.

Geneva leaned back in her seat and sighed into her phone. "O.K, Cheryl. Tell him I'm coming." She closed the phone, only to have it ring immediately. She smiled as she saw the number. "Januk, my love. How are you?"

Her husband's voice was cold and strained. "This is the one, Geneva. Wiggins is Senator Jackson."

"So, we found our deep throat."

"He's confirmed to be the person who leaked the internal NSA report to the Times. He's become a believer, and he's looking for recruits."

"We can't have that, now can we?" Geneva curled up in one corner of the seat, folding her long legs as she hugged them.

"Just remember, the NSA has to know we did it. But not the newspapers. Can you do that?"

"Of course, my love," Geneva said, her voice barely audible. Her thoughts started to race. How on Earth was she going to fool the newspapers into thinking the Senator had died of natural causes, but not some government agency?

Januk answered for her. "You realize you'll need to be in your Aur'a, Geneva. You have to leave them a message that could only come from someone with Shaadarian blood."

Geneva opened her mouth to protest, only to have the call disconnect. Sex with a Normal when she was quickened? She wasn't even sure that was possible. She tried dialing Januk back, but the line was busy. Muttering a curse as old as Aria itself, she dropped the phone on the seat beside to her.

The fact that she was having to do this at all was just one more indication that things were starting to slip. The screw-ups of the last couple of weeks had given the spooks and the military too much data. All of it stemming from Tala's mess in Patuxent River. She'd started hearing whispers about extraterrestrials at several parties and had overheard the beginnings of counter plans in private phone calls. The information was rising through the political ranks. The Senator had had been the first politician to talk publicly about it. Now it was time to send them all message. To tell them that whatever they thought they

knew, they must keep it out of the public eye or suffer the consequences.

Geneva's grew darker. Moments later, her grimace slowly turned to a soft smile as a funny thought crossed her mind. She heard herself laugh. Doing the Senator while doing him? That would make Januk happy. In a perverse way at least. If it did nothing else, it would prove his masculine superiority. Given his Arion genes, he was the physical one in bed, not her. Not that she minded. She loved his wiry strength and the way he'd use it please every part of her.

Her smile faded as quickly as it had come. Actually, outside of Januk's likely point of view, it really wasn't funny at all. A man's life hung in the balance.

Geneva just wished the mission would end. It was starting to wreak havoc on her personal life. Januk had become depressed lately. She was really starting to worry about him. Especially tonight. His voice had sounded so strained.

It was bad enough that they were starting their second wedding anniversary this way. Januk already hated the way she came home from work, complaining of the smell of Terran men on her body. She said nothing. She didn't have a problem with that musky, raw scent. To the contrary, she found it excitingly primitive and vital, but she wasn't going to tell Januk that.

He would always have the Jacuzzi ready. Between the bubbling water and plenty of soap and his loving attentions, he'd remove all

traces of human scent from her body. He'd obsessively scrub every square millimeter of her body until he was convinced she was clean. Then he'd take her in his arms and replace the human seed with his own. His inspired lovemaking would always send her to bed exhausted and happy.

She consoled herself with that thought. At least her days ended well. The Jacuzzi and her husband; that was her reward.

But not tonight. Instead, she felt a cold numbness creeping into the pit of her stomach. She snuggled deeper into the corner of the seat and closed her eyes, thinking through some scenarios. She stopped after a moment. No. She wasn't going to rehearse it. Whatever happened, she'd not plan it out any further. She'd just go with the flow, finding her moment without premeditation.

She shouldn't be involved in this in the first place. She was a trained Communications officer, not a security operative like Ayla's people. It was so unfair that she was being asked to terminate an important member of the US government. This was Ayla's type of work.

Yet if she was honest with herself, she'd known ever since she'd been inserted into Washington that this day might come. Even before they came down, Januk been very vocal in protesting her assignment. But Tala had insisted. In the end, he had no choice but to comply. Still, he hated it every day, as much for what it did to him



as to her. He was a proud man, and he loathed letting what he called 'Frails' touch his wife.

Geneva always grimaced when he used that old Arion pejorative. She reassured him time after time that she took no pleasure from their weak bodies. But Januk knew her better than that. She had a lot of Velorian in her, that much was obvious at a single glance. Every Shaadarian knew that there had once been an inexplicable sexual connection between Velorians and Terrans.

It was ultimately Geneva's decision to go forward with the mission. Which she did with her usual enthusiasm. The only concession she granted Januk was that she agreed to charge the Terrans a fortune. For defiling her, as he called it.

Januk decided on ten thousand dollars a night. He knew enough about Terran economics to realize that few men could pay such a fee for mere pleasure.

Januk's plan had worked at first. No one was willing to pay that kind of money for sex. Not in Washington. An important man could always bed a pretty and ambitious young intern for the mere price of a good dinner.

Then Tala started pressuring Geneva, complaining that she wasn't making the kind of contacts inside the power elite of Washington that she needed. Geneva wasn't learning anything that her techs couldn't pick up with their electronic surveillance. Januk explained that he was making Geneva so exclusive that she'd gain

access to only the most powerful of men. Which in post-pulse America, meant the richest. The ones who could afford to have both political ambitions and an expensive mistresses.

Tala saw through that thin excuse before Januk finished telling his tale. She insisted on immediate results or she'd recall the two them. That made Januk happy, but Geneva was horrified. She'd never failed at anything in her life, and she wasn't going to now. She'd always looked up to Tala.

It didn't take Geneva long to come up with a way to overcome her promise to Januk and remain true to Tala's mission. The revelation came as she emerged from Macy's with a bag full of free cosmetic samples. Giving it away wasn't the same as charging.

She began studying the Washington gossip web sites. She identified a dozen influential lobbyists along with a few philandering congressman and some high-flying CEO's with political connections and more money than good sense. She learned their habits and stalked them, finally managing to approach them in private. Surrounded by a shimmering cloud of Shaadarian pheromones, she made them an age-old offer with a twist. Her only price was that they had to tell their friends about her. As many details as they'd be willing to share. Free samples, so to speak.

The men's eyes lit up like they'd discovered the bargain of the century. They eagerly took her back to their hotels or bedrooms. There she dazzled them with her knowledge of ancient Velorian skills.

She'd studied erotic holos of Velorian lore for months before bestowing her talents on Januk the night he'd proposed to her. Little did she know that she'd need those skills in a more professional capacity a year and a half later.

Between her sensuality and her pheromones, she was capable of taking men to erotic places they'd never dreamed existed. Her natural Velorian scent had been further biomeched by the Pactrel to enhance her partner's sexual vitality. Older men felt, and most importantly performed, like young men again when in her arms. The physical passion of a young man combined with the patient skills and appreciation of an older man made them into wonderful lovers.

Geneva had been surprised to find that her own response to Terran men was pure and unaffected. As had been rumored so long ago by the Velorians, Terran men had one superior talent: they knew how to appreciate a beautiful woman.

It was something that Januk would never understand. He'd grown up in a world populated by the shattered offspring of the Supremis race, and had little appreciation for physical beauty. More than that, he had too much Arion in him to appreciate the subtleties possible during lovemaking. He considered it another form of athletics, and he was a very athletic man.

Geneva had been happy enough with that. But now she'd learned that there were far more subtle dimensions of loving. She was discovering an entire universe of different passions.

She made it a habit to always leave a few business cards with her clients. Gifts for their friends. Soon the phone began to ring. In another Pactrelian biochemical twist, her pheromones were addictive to those who tasted them directly. Men would sell their souls to return to her arms again.

Januk was of course furious when he found out about her so-called 'focused marketing plan'.

Tala, on the other hand, was ecstatic. Geneva was finally gaining access to the right kind of men.

Word of mouth traveled fast in Washington, and her cards were soon being traded from friend to friend. Men talked endlessly about her in their clubs, their voices trembling with a rapture that took on religious overtones. They talked in hushed tones about a goddess. An angel of loving.

In their prideful arrogance, her well-healed clients didn't question why their physical performance was suddenly that of a man in his twenties. They just assumed that the inspiration of her beauty and her unrestrained sexuality had released the real man inside them. It never occurred to them that Geneva was using a carefully bio-engineered drug on them.

Herself.

She hit the big time a few months before the November elections. Someone with more ambition than common sense started to use her as a secret perk for large campaign contributions to the Republican

Party. If you donated a half million dollars to the President's re-election campaign, you got to spend the most memorable night of your life. It was an act of political desperation, but also a windfall for Geneva.

The calls started coming in so fast that Geneva had to get an agent to handle them. Januk raised her price to twelve thousand, then fifteen, but she was still booked a month in advance. Men who could contribute half a million dollars to a political party weren't young, and to a man, they were thrilled to regain their sexual youth, even if only for a single night. These were men who felt it was their right to enjoy the ultimate entitlement of their wealth and power: the company of a young and spectacularly beautiful woman.

Yet unbeknownst to her clients, who were busy showing her off like some kind of shiny jewel, Geneva was gathering a wealth of intelligence about what government officials knew about her people. She had a photographic memory, and with her enhanced hearing, she could overhear every word from a dozen conversations. When she got home, she'd burst it all out to Januk's recorder in compressed speech for analysis back on the ship.

She didn't uncover anything truly valuable at first. Ayla's people were very successful in hiding their true nature. Coming and going as shadows, none of the Terrans had hard evidence about the so-called 'Omegan terrorists'. Just a lot of twisted rumors and panicky fears. She worked harder, sleeping her way inward in a spiral that led

unerringly toward the core of the Republican leadership. Her life became a blur of exotic fashions, fancy hotels, bright lights and the inflamed passion of her lovers. She was soon in the middle of several scandals, and the cause of a divorce. Yet the men kept coming.

Her offer was simple. She promised to fulfill any fantasy a man wished, play any role, do absolutely anything at all. No protection, no limits. Anywhere, anytime.

She didn't have to work very hard at it, for she'd always enjoyed acting in plays back on Aurora. She loved falling deeply into character, wearing exotic clothing, even costumes sometimes. Mostly though, she played what the men thought was her natural self -- a lovely young woman who was so helplessly overwhelmed by a man's worldly powers that she wanted to spend all her time making love to him.

They were wise men, her clients, but their hearts chose to believe what their rational minds knew was false. It was always their incessant longings, the side effect of her pheromones, that won out. Half her clients thought they were in love with her.

In stark contrast to her lifestyle, Januk sat home in the dark and brooded. He grew increasingly depressed. He saw his wife only during those few hours when she came home in the morning to cuddle in their Jacuzzi and then get a few hours of sleep. She was excited about homing in on the people who were responsible for uncovering the truth about the Omegans.

Januk tried to make those few hours with his wife the best he could, but the phone would always ring again too soon. Geneva had always been obsessive about doing her job better than anyone else could, and this job was no different. Yet this was hardly the kind of profession she'd been trained for.

She'd graduated from the Sanyong Technological University back on Aurora, majoring in subspace communications engineering. She'd subsequently joined the Fleet as a communications officer. The process of maintaining sub-space communications was both a science and an art and she was skillful at both.

Her ship was the *Roger Krom*, a deep-space Pactrelian survey ship. It was there that she met and married Januk, another Virgo, and appropriate to his clan, the ship's entertainment officer. The ship's three-year long transit through the wormholes between the Pactrelian and Terran systems was the happiest time of their lives.

When they arrived in the Sol system, everyone on the ship was assigned two jobs. Half their time was to be spent down on the planet, either pacifying the violent humans by culling their military leaders, or infiltrating their local power structures like Geneva.

The first few years had been full of successes, but now it was starting to change. Since Tala's catastrophe at Patuxent River, the inner core of the US government suddenly believed they were being visited. Senator Jackson had gone so far as to break the faith of the inner circle by talking about the 'alien invaders' to a major newspaper.

Geneva's cab was halfway to the Ritz-Carlton before she finally decided on her plan of attack. She picked up her phone and punched up her agency again. "Cheryl, is Heather available?"

There was a pause. "It's 2:30, Geneva. She's home at her parent's house."

"Call and tell her to get over to the Ritz as fast as she can. I'll be delayed, so I'll need her to keep the Senator company. Tell her I'll make it worth her while."

"I'm on it. I'll call you back if there's a problem."

Geneva closed her phone, satisfied with her impromptu change in plan. She wasn't just going to send a message. She was going to discredit the man.

Heather claimed she was nineteen, but her real ID, hidden in her purse, proclaimed the truth of seventeen. There would be a huge stink when the cops found that. A dead Senator with an underage call girl. Forensics would prove he'd had sex with her. The press would go into a feeding frenzy, taking bites out of the Senator's credibility like hungry sharks. Nobody in the Press would believe the ridiculous story he'd given the Times about aliens. Female super-warriors. All the stuff he'd spouted to a disbelieving reporter. If not for the Senator's reputation, it never would have been published.

Geneva leaned forward and asked the cabbie let her out a mile from the Ritz. She slipped him a hundred to ensure he wouldn't remember who she was.



Walking into the darkness between two buildings, she paused to listen for heartbeats. She heard many tiny ones, but no humans. Satisfied with her privacy, she tilted her head back and shrugged her shoulders, working to loosen up the special muscles in her chest that activated her Aur'a'lenz. She focused her attention on a tiny muscle that had been biomeched into her body, and tensed it very hard.

A riot of hot pinpricks instantly exploded from deep inside her chest. The burning, tingling heat radiated outward. Long suppressed hormones flooded into her bloodstream. Her nipples grew hard. Her heart pounded. She gasped in very real pain as a burst of searing hot flashes washed over her. Her skin became slick with sweat and her eyes flashed like blue lasers.

She'd always had a difficult time entering her Aur'a.

She bit her lip to keep from crying out as the heat built toward an unbearable climax. The center of her chest was glowing brightly. A sizzle of steam rose from her chest. A red glow shone from deep inside her cleavage, spreading outward, threatening to ignite her dress.

Then, just when she thought she could endure the pain no more, the heat faded into an unearthly flush of ultimate well-being. An overwhelming surge of strength and sublime vitality radiated all the way out to her fingertips and toes. The sensation was one that any Velorian would have recognized. She clenched her fists, and the naked power of a Velorian Protector coursed through her tendons.

Geneva reached up to pull the sweat-dampened hair from her face. Her chest rose and fell from her heavy breathing, and her nipples tingled wildly as they stretched her tight dress almost to tearing. Spinning around on her toes, she felt as light as a feather, her mood strangely giddy. Smiling like a young girl, she bent down low, her slender legs briefly tensing with steely muscle. She leaped off the ground so fast that she rocketed upward between the narrow brick walls and metal fire escapes of the alley. The brownstones fell so far away beneath her that they merged into the diffusely lighted darkness of the city.

While she rose, she struggled to tense a second biomeched muscle. This one was attached to her pelvic floor. It controlled her implanted antigrav. To her surprise, she couldn't feel the muscle. She started to fall, the air rushing by faster and faster. She cursed the fact that she'd too often used her inner muscles for less noble purposes than flight, and barely had time to ball herself up before she crashed through the top of a parked van.

Unharmful but embarrassed, she tore her way back out of the vehicle, pieces of metal and shattered plastic littering the street. She kicked her shoes off and began to run. A hundred steps later she leaped into the air again, this time finding and tensing that special muscle. The cybernetic antigrav, surgically implanted in her pelvic bones at birth, burst to life in a blaze of matter/anti-matter heat. The forcefield sent her soaring straight up into the night sky.

Minutes later she was flying ten miles high above the fluffy clouds, basking in the light of a full moon. And smiling.

She had some serious energy to burn off before visiting the Senator.

## **Chapter Six**

*Sunday, November 10, 2019 1:40am, Washington, DC*

Geneva came back to earth ninety minutes later. Still lost in the joy of her Aur'a, she didn't think to check out the tactical situation, something Ayla's people would have done from a mile up.

The result was that she never saw the cameras that zoomed in on her as she touched down on the roof of the Ritz-Carlton. After all these months of pretending to be merely human, she was overjoyed to be able to fly again.

Her first love had always been flying. She'd flown every day back on Aurora, slipping into her Aur'a for a quick half hour flight and then coming back to ground, saving her energies for the next day. She often teased herself by traveling all the way to the edge of space and back again, long before she was selected to serve in the Fleet. The hard vacuum would tug at her body, trying but failing to turn her inside out. She knew she couldn't survive for long in space, a scant half-hour at best, but it was fun to challenge herself. If flying was life, then she'd not truly lived since she'd come down to Earth.

Like most Shaadarians, she couldn't spend too many hours in her Aur'a without becoming exhausted. As opposed to the Orgone metabolism of a Velorian, she drew her energy from implanted cybernetic organs that were in turn powered by alternate-matter. AM

to the layman. The experts called it matter/anti-matter conversion. AM was expensive to replace if her burn rate was too high, for the tiny converters had to be inserted into her body after the old ones had been exhausted.

Much of the Supremis legacy had been lost during the Turning. It was only at moments like this that Geneva could appreciate how wondrous it must have been to be a Protector. The archives said they'd possessed such power every day of their lives.

She filed that amazing thought away as she walked confidently along the narrow ledge that circled the darkened roof of the building. Far from being afraid, she exhilarated in the exposure. Heights were hardly dangerous for a woman who could fly. Or could survive the fall even if she couldn't.

She peered through several windows until she finally found a crack in the drapes. Heather was there, showing off her teenage flexibility by straddling the Senator on the floor. Her long red hair and recently enhanced bust made her look like a Playmate. She'd worked for the agency last summer, and was now attending UC San Diego, majoring in Journalism. A remarkable academic achievement for a girl of seventeen. Heather told anyone who'd listen that she was going to be the next Hena Christensen, the woman who consistently topped the polls as the 'most respected' News personality.

Working part-time while she was staying with her parents for the Christmas holidays, Heather's fake ID and brilliantly red hair would

ensure that nobody recognized her later. She made enough money working three months a year that she could focus on just being a student the rest of the time. Her parents hadn't been able to afford sending her to out-of-state school, so Heather had found a few men who'd make up the difference.

Geneva smiled at that last thought. Heather definitely possessed more than just academic skills. Right now she was encouraging the Senator to explore the perfection he'd never experienced as a young man. He was staring up at her with that look of wonder that older men reserve for very young women. It was like he was replaying his youth, and finally making it with that insanely cute cheerleader that he'd never had a chance with back when he was that age.

Heather smiled and whispered something in his ear while reaching into her purse for a small bottle. She wet her hand with it, and reached down to spread it slowly and sensuously over him. Then she rose to put on the same outfit she'd worn on the sidelines only a year before. It was authentic except that she wore nothing under the tiny skirt. For a man seeking to fulfill his high school or college cheerleader fantasy, she was the authentic real thing. The Senator lay flat on his back and smiled as she danced around and over him, imitating the style of the girls on NFL Sundays.

Geneva was impressed. Heather had a definite talent for drawing out older men's fantasies.

Leaving them to their erotic game, she focused her attention back outside. The windows were secured with thick bars of hardened steel. It was the best in physical security that money could buy. Unfortunately for the Senator, it hadn't been designed to stop someone whose best genes came from that long-dead golden planet.

She gripped one of the bars and pulled, feeling her Aur'al strength building. It felt so sublimely sensual to exert herself this way, the flow of superhuman strength pulling on her tendons and joints, her muscles bunching larger than her slender physique should have allowed. She smiled proudly as the hard steel yielded in her grip and collapsed. The sensation was strangely arousing, almost erotic.

She'd always been proud of her Velorian heritage. Especially now as the steel bars began to give off a low keening sound. She twisted her wrist and watched the ripple of muscle that defined her bare arm. Slender muscles, yet harder than any steel, as Januk liked to tell her. She took a deep breath, her chest swelling as she wondered what her clients would think if they saw her now. A high-class hooker with the raw strength of a Protector?

She amused herself with that strange thought as she slowly bent the half dozen bars away from the window. They wouldn't even know what a Protector was.

She finally snapped the window's security lock with her fingernails and slid the glass open, then floated through the opening to stand behind the curtains. The two lovers were far too engaged in their

game to notice her. She drifted weightlessly across the room and into the second bedroom. Dimming the lights, she sat down on the edge of the desk to wait for her pheromones to bring the Senator to her.

The door handle turned a few minutes later, and a shaft of light shone in to illuminate her. The Senator looked in, his eyes wide.

"How... how did you get here?"

"I flew."

The Senator laughed. "Like that comic book girl?"

Geneva leaned back to reveal her breasts under the tight top of her dress, her hem rising to display her long legs to good advantage. "If that's who you want me to be. But I forgot my costume."

"God, you are so beautiful," he exclaimed as he walked closer. He took a deep breath of her natural perfume. "I've heard so much about you."

Geneva nodded toward the outer room. "Such an important man should get all the perks."

He barely glanced back. "Oh, she was cute enough. Entertaining even. But you, you're absolutely stunning. Everyone in town is talking about you."

Geneva giggled sexily. "Surely not everyone, Senator. But perhaps among your friends who share similar passions."

"No Earthly beauty exceeds that of a lovely woman," he said smoothly. He took another deep breath, and his face flushed bright



red. Her pheromones were already working. He inhaled again, and he rose to point skyward like a young man.

"Just close the door, Senator. I don't think we're going to need any help in here, now are we?"

The Senator looked down at himself in amazement. "Jesus. Would you look at that!"

"I have a better idea." She scooted closer to the edge of the desk. Her skirt bunched up to reveal a hint of frilly black panties.

He stepped closer to stand between her legs, placing his hands gently on her knees. She placed her hands on his, coaxing them upward to caress her smooth thighs. He flushed even brighter as he marveled at the paradox of soft skin and tight muscle.

"How many miles a day do you run anyway?" he asked.

"I prefer to fly. I'm an alien, don't you know?"

The Senator smiled as Geneva leaned forward to kiss him. Her blonde hair reflected the light like white gold as it fell across his shoulders. When he looked up into her eyes, they sparkled like cut diamonds. Her large aquamarine irises glowed as brightly as someone looking into the sun.

"God, you are so perfect." He slipped his fingers under her warm hair to find her shoulders, so flawless and tanned. Tight skin stretched over hard muscle. Her firm breasts pressed against his chest, so large and high, unaffected by gravity. She was breathing

hard, her breasts rising and falling as if straining to escape the confines of her mesh dress. Below that, the faint outline of her abs tensed as she leaned closer, forming a soft grid across her flat stomach.

His body was tense and ready. Her nipples pressed against his hard chest. Her fingers traced down his pants to find him, hold him. She kissed him deeply, just for a moment, and then turned her head to trace her tongue around his ear, darting inside, hot, and insistent.

He suddenly wanted to fuck her. Hard.

She guided his hands to the top of her dress, encouraging him to tear it down to her waist. He pulled the torn mesh open. She took his hands and held them to her breasts. Her nipples were very hard. He held her tightly, fingers sinking into perfect softness, flesh as firm as a young girl, yet as full as a woman. He inhaled the honey and wildflowers of her hair, and a surge of incredible strength washed over him. His desire soared beyond reason as he slipped deeply into pheromic overdrive. His heart beat wildly and his skin flushed ever brighter. Every cell in his body awakened to find itself suffused in an overdose of adrenaline and endomorphine. Her pheromic chemistry had traveled directly to his pleasure centers.

He tried to spread her legs wider, but she didn't let him. Instead, she slipped forward to stand in front of the desk, her body molding against his. His hand slipped under her skirt to find her panties. Working his way past them, his fingers found her center, opening her.

She pulled his hand away, lifting his moist fingers to take them between pursed lips, tasting herself. He pulled his hand from hers, slipping his fingers back into her.

Geneva moaned and arched her back, leaning backward over the desk, long hair falling over the green felt top. She lifted both legs to wrap them around his waist, pulling him closer. He tore at her panties, ripping them, finding her naked and smooth. Lifting her skirt up around her waist, she guided his hands to the rounded firmness of her ass, its perfection a credit to the Galen's artistry.

Slowly lifting one leg as high as a showgirl, she rested it on his shoulder as she stood on her other foot, opening herself wider so he could take her deeper with his fingers. His fingers were long and fat, his fucking rough and crude.

His overdrive strength excited Geneva. She was wet and invulnerable and eagerly accommodating all at the same time. She flaunted her perfect flexibility by pressing her chest against her upraised thigh, standing on one foot and leaning forward to kiss him deeply.

The Senator moaned and pulled his fingers back. He guided himself upward, trying to take her.

"No, wait." Geneva tightened herself, denying him as only someone with Velorian blood could. "Make me really hot first."

He flushed even brighter, his breath like a steam engine. Her biomeched pheromones had opened a pathway to the depths of his

primitive id. The primitive, ancient mindlessness of the rut came over him. A million years of civilization vanished in a heartbeat. He growled like some kind of animal, showing his teeth. He tore at her clothing, ripping the rest of her dress off.

Geneva was momentarily taken aback by his primitiveness. He'd suddenly transformed from a gentleman into a Neanderthal, violent and obsessed. She saw the crazed look in his eyes, and knew he'd give his life just to fuck her.

Perfect.

She let him push her down on the bed, spreading her legs for him, his kisses hungrily tasting hers. He pinned her hands over her head as he crudely impaled her in one violent, gasping thrust.

Geneva cried out in very real passion as she pushed his hands back up to pull him down to her. Her cries of pleasure were genuine, her body yielding naturally to his masculine power. Ancient reflexes arose. She imagined that he was a Galen god, that she was his Protector. She was his woman.

He was not gentle. No man in the overdrive of the rut was. He fucked her with a primal strength and passion that a man half his age should not have possessed. His body was filled with chemically-enhanced stamina. Geneva encouraged him, crying out for him to fuck her harder yet. His uncontrolled strength slammed her head violently against the wall. His face turned a brilliant red as she felt him surging toward his completion.

Like her ancestors had done so skillfully before her, she tightened her labial muscles around the base of his erection. Trapping the blood, making him even bigger, harder. Denying his release.

He felt like a super man as wave after wave of vitality filled him. He no longer cared if he hurt her. Intoxicatingly, a primitive part of him wanted to. His crude Neanderthalic passion took him to the very edge of sanity – and beyond.

The bed suddenly collapsed, spilling them both onto the floor. Geneva landed on top, pumping her body over him as he cried out hoarsely, expecting to come like he always had before. Yet he found no relief. Geneva's biomeched pheromones suppressed the very nerve endings that would grant him escape from his spiraling desire.

Lost in the screaming climax of his fucking, the urgency of his desperate desire made him more violent. Grabbing her hair, he rolled her over on her back and slammed her head into the wood floor hard enough to seriously injure a lesser woman. He threw himself against her with all his weight and strength. He kissed her so hard that he split his own lip on her teeth. He tore at her with fingers and nails and even teeth, trying to devour her flesh like a wild animal, pounding her with his fists as well as his sex, his gasping breath sounding like a steam engine.

Geneva arched her back in desire, lifting him with her hips, enjoying being taken by a Terran man with overdrive strength. As

energetic as her clients usually were, the Senator's needs were so primitive and raw that he was literally burning his body up.

This was the design intent of her Virgo pheromones. More a weapon than mere erotic stimulus, her Aur'al scents could trap a man at the very peak of his screaming desire. She knew that she would either kill him with her uncontrolled strength, or let him overexert himself by fucking her until his heart failed.

He screamed like a wild animal as he tore at her breasts while pounding himself into her with even greater strength. She merely closed her eyes and gave herself up to the tingling promise of her own rising desires. The sex was so violent and primitive that it awakened her deeper desires. Something Velorian. This man truly wanted to hurt her. Yet, marvelously, he could not. No matter what he did, she felt only pleasure.

Luxuriating in that last thought, she wrapped her legs around his, encouraging him. He threw his two hundred pounds of weight against her as if he was trying to crush her body, thrusting deep with every lunge. She tangled her long fingers in his thinning hair to pull him down to her lips, tasting his blood.

That taste was all she needed. An explosion like a thousand starbursts ignited deep inside her to fling her headlong into ecstasy. Her inner muscles tightened to freeze him in mid-thrust as she screamed high and loud enough to shatter the window behind her.

Glass showered down on them as she hugged him to her in a final, frantic rush of passion.

Lost in her ecstasy, she didn't feel the pop and wet crunch of his pelvis as she held him so tightly between her legs. Nor did she feel the rib that bent too far and finally broke against the steel of her own. She was only conscious of his overdriven heart racing against hers like a trapped bird; its echo projecting inside her from his deep penetration. He screamed in mortal pain as his heart beat so fast it began to fibrillate.

And then he collapsed.

## **Chapter Seven**

*Sunday, November 10, 2019 2:35am, Washington, DC*

Geneva lay limply on the floor, the warm echoes of her pleasure fading. She had no idea where she'd gotten the last second willpower not to kill him. She was barely conscious of him lying beside her, clutching his chest. She rolled him over on his back. He needed immediate cardiac care if he was to live. She listened to the ragged, halting beat of his heart. He was obviously in severe pain. She glanced up at his face. His eyes were wide open in terror, his skin a pasty white color.

She knew she should finish him off. The rules were simple. Anyone who knew too much about the Shaadar must be terminated. The Senator knew way too much. Especially now.

Instead, she wrapped her arms around herself with all her strength as the bile rose in her stomach. She could still feel the horror of his damaged heartbeat deep inside her. She began to gag at the mere thought of touching him again. It was all she could do to make it into the bathroom before she lost it all.

When her stomach finally emptied, she grabbed the toilet handle, only to have it crush in her grip. She was still deeply in her Aur'a. Fortunately the toilet still flushed, and the wash of air from the swirling



water steadied her stomach just enough for her to stagger shakily to her feet.

Heather was pounding on the locked bedroom door. "Geneva? Are you O.K, love?"

She steeled herself for what she had to do next. Despite Heather's questionable way of earning money for college, she was a good kid. Enthusiastic, and paradoxically, truly an innocent. She connected with her clients. Not as a hooker, but as a friend. A friend who was willing to share her body for the simple pleasure of having sex. And, of course, enough money to go to school. Heather rationalized it by telling herself that her clients had so much money that they'd never miss what she took from them. Unfortunately, she took their hearts as well. One of her regulars had gone so far as to ask her to marry him.

Geneva closed her eyes and said a little prayer for Heather's soul, a warrior's tradition that had been passed down from the Supremis. When she opened the bedroom door, her eyes were moist with tears. She slipped through the door into the outer room to keep Heather from hearing the Senator's gasping breath.

Heather wore a transparent silk gown, her reddish blonde hair and startlingly green eyes so classically Irish. Her scent was earthy, smelling both of her own arousal and the Senator's. It mixed delightfully with Geneva's sweet scent. At 5'10, Heather was shorter than Geneva, yet still considered very tall by most men.

"Jesus, it sounded like world war three in there, Geneva. Are you O.K.?"

Geneva leaned down to gently kiss Heather's cheek, wetting her with her tears. "I'm fine," she sniffed. "He's sleeping now. A violent, twisted man. Are you O.K.?"

"He didn't hurt me." Heather said, shaking her head as she rested her cheek against Geneva's shoulder. She inhaled the scent of Geneva's skin, and her face flushed pink. She was smiling warmly when she looked back up at Geneva. "God, you are so good at this. I've just got to get some of that perfume of yours. I think it even works on me."

Geneva barely heard the suggestion in Heather's words. Her thoughts were racing as she considered how to set up the crime scene. It would be most effective if she made it look like the Senator suffered a heart attack while engaging Heather in some very kinky behavior. Perhaps while strangling her with a pair of her own stockings.

Heather interrupted Geneva's dark thoughts by wrapping her arms around her neck. "Show me how you make your men so wonderfully, wickedly happy." She leaned forward to kiss Geneva passionately.

Geneva was shocked, not so much from the kiss, but from the contrast of their thoughts. She was considering ways to kill Heather, and Heather was trying to find a way to make love to her. The girl

was truly an innocent. Suddenly confused and unsure of herself, Geneva leaned her head back to break the kiss.

Heather laughed at the look on her face, interpreting it correctly as confusion, but also as reluctance. She had no idea how dangerous Geneva was, or that she was minutes from an untimely death. Instead, she acted as impulsively. She leaped up to wrap her bare legs around Geneva's waist, kissing her again, this time with the wild abandon of overdriven passion.

Geneva stiffened. She tried not to think. Instincts only. Her hands slipped under Heather's hair, gently caressing her neck, working her thumbs to the exact spots she'd been trained to use. Heather leaned her head back so trustingly, exposing her neck, silently pleading to be taken to heaven.

Far from feeling amorous, Geneva's thoughts were growing ever darker. She would take Heather to heaven. Literally. Her death would ensure that the Senator was discredited. It would prove that he was a sick and criminal man. Geneva held that thought as she pressed her thumbs tightly against the pressure points on Heather's neck, occluding the blood flow to her brain. The girl slumped unconscious in her arms, her green eyes slowly closing.

Geneva heart was suddenly torn as she kissed Heather a final time. A goodbye kiss? Heather had been too trusting, too vulnerable. Yet she'd never hurt anyone. But she had to die. For the cause. For the mission. For peace.

That last thought crashed through the boundaries of Geneva's focused thoughts. How was killing this girl going to save lives? Wouldn't the mere fact that the Senator was found with her be enough to ruin him?

Geneva eased the pressure on Heather's neck as she wrestled with her emotions. Some blood began to flow to Heather's brain, keeping her alive. Geneva listened to her heart. It was still strong. She could still recover. She was just unconscious.

"No." The other side of her mind lashed out like a whip. Januk would have to come and clean up the mess if she didn't do it. He wouldn't leave a witness behind.

Geneva felt the tears streaming down her cheeks as she pressed her thumbs forward again. It was so unfair. Why couldn't she make her own decisions? Why did she have to do this for Januk? He didn't even know Heather.

She occluded the blood flow again, holding her thumb against her carotid longer this time. Heather's heart started to race like a pump running out of water, struggling frantically to push blood to her brain. A sudden unbidden image of Heather's parents standing by their daughter's coffin flashed before Geneva's eyes. She saw them crying, full of the hateful realization of what her daughter did in her spare time, yet with hearts still full of love. Wondering where they had gone wrong in raising her.

What was to be gained by causing such human misery and suffering?

Geneva had no good answer.

Would Heather's death guarantee the Senator's ruin. Absolutely.

Could the outcome be the same with both of them surviving. Maybe.

Without realizing it, Geneva released the pressure enough to let the blood flow resume. Heather took a gasping breath of air, and lived.

Geneva was smiling as she laid Heather's unconscious form beside the Senator. She'd made her own decision. She wouldn't tell Januk until it was too late.

The Senator was out of it now, his heart beating fast and raggedly. Geneva brushed away her drying tears as she opened a vial and spread a small quantity of Myst'al, the amnesia drug, on her lips. She leaned forward to kiss Heather gently. She was so innocent and beautiful when she slept. So delicate.

She held that thought as she forced herself to brush her lips against the Senator's. She nearly gagged at the cold, clammy feel of his skin. She quickly wiped her lips off with her arm as she placed a tiny pill between his lips. A Shaadarian drug that should ensure he'd survive his heart attack.

She finally stood up and reviewed her handiwork. Januk wasn't going to like it at all, and the bruises wouldn't fool forensics, but they would satisfy the casual observer. She hoped the government would still decode her message and ensure that the real story didn't come out.

In any case, she'd made up her mind. All that was left was to make a quick call to 911.

She identified herself as a hotel maid. She said she'd found two unconscious people in a hotel room. She gave the specifics and then hung before they could ask any questions.

Standing outside on the darkened roof a few moments later, her feet hanging over the edge, she felt relieved. Januk would hate her plan, but he'd be forced to live with it. She'd chosen life over death. Hope over despair.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath of the fresh night air. A breeze was blowing from the east, carrying with it the scent of the sea. Drawing upon the disciplines she'd been taught, she carefully pushed the events of the last hour to the back of her mind.

She opened her eyes after a long moment and stepped off into open space. She fell for a fraction of a second before tensing the muscle that activated her Aer'ie. A rush of weightlessness surrounded her, and she climbed above the building, racing straight up like a homesick angel.

Her only thought was to fall into Januk's waiting arms. To make love to the man she truly loved.

## **Chapter Eight**

*Monday, November 11, 2019, 7:30am, Washington DC office of the FBI*

Special Agent Kendrick Howell read the Post article for a second time. It was written with surprising sensitivity considering the delicate subject. A prominent Senator had suffered a heart attack in a hotel room with an underage call girl. By itself, that wasn't terribly unusual. What was, was that the girl had been strangled half to death and the Senator had suffered serious injuries. A crushed pelvis. Some ribs too. That was unusual. Presumably they'd been into some kind of dangerous kink that had gone too far.

There were large sums of cash on the dresser, along with two vials of cocaine. Forensics had found traces of the Senator's semen in the girl's vagina. It wasn't a hard case to make.

The Senator wasn't charged with statutory rape. The girl was clearly a pro. But he would be suspended from his Senate duties. His real punishment would come in the Newspaper and on TV. The public outcry over his conduct would ring the death knell of his career. He would never get elected again.

He'd held a prominent post in the Senate: head of the Intelligence Appropriations Committee. He'd recently been working to convince his colleagues to vote for a bill that would invest billions in



energy weapons research to stop the Omegan terrorists. The research was being done down in New Mexico at a place called Reichter Labs.

Then he'd made a critical mistake. He pushed too hard to get support for his bill. During an interview by his home paper, the Los Angeles Times, he stated officially that extraterrestrials were assassinating the military leadership of the United States.

Because of the Senator's prominence, the article had run on page one. The public outcry, most of it frank disbelief, was withering. The late night talk shows made fun of him. Nobody in their right mind really believed in extraterrestrials, did they? Just those nuts. The saucer freaks.

Jackson came back to claim that his committee would produce evidence of a worldwide plot by the aliens. He told the News that the world was in grave danger.

The senior Republican leadership and the NSA did their usual 'neither confirm nor deny' thing. So did the FBI and CIA. They all knew that the Senator was bait.

The bait had been taken, and now this report on the Senator's extracurricular activities was appearing in this morning's Washington Post. Kendrick smiled. Extracurricular activities, not extraterrestrial.

He'd read the article the first time on his way into work. The Post had portrayed Jackson as a man needing help. A man who engaged

young women in questionable transactions, imagining they were some kind of extraterrestrial warriors.

At the very least, people would think that he was a man who'd lost his perspective and his ability to critically reason. At the worst, some would assume he was a sexual deviant. Having sex with minors. A criminal. In either case, he wasn't a man who was fit to sit in the Senate, that much was for sure.

Fortunately, the Director had gotten his hands on the police report before the Post did. Special Agents had grabbed it and passed it on to Kendrick. The single existing copy was lying on his desk right now. A mysterious computer crash had wiped out last night's medical examiner's reports. Kendrick had ordered that as well.

He read the report one more time before putting it in his safe. It didn't take much imagination to see the signature of an Omegan attack written all over it. The cops who'd responded to the 911 would never consider that angle. And the Medical Examiner was too busy to worry too much about one more unexplained. Even a high-profile one. What with gen-tech abuse and post-Pulse social problems, they saw a lot of strange things.

The only problem was with AIMS. The Artificially Intelligent Mass Spectrometer. AIMS was a very sophisticated neural network, distributed through a hundred Medical Examiner's offices, and coupled with advanced laboratory analytical equipment. AIMS was the ultimate in forensic science. According to AIMS, there were traces

of vaginal fluids and drugs on the Senator's skin that contained exotic organics that had never been seen before.

AIMS ran a full organic analysis and came up with the speculation that it was a gen-teched hormone. An unclassified one. It appeared to contain a large number of non-human genes that had been grafted onto a normal human DNA substrate helix. It could have come from the Gens. They were all chimeras. The real problem was that AIMS couldn't identify the grafted genes. They didn't match any animal DNA in its database.

The x-rays taken in the Cardiac Unit of Washington Central, not to mention the serious soft tissue damage to his sexual organs, made it clear that the Senator had been brutally crushed by someone with very strong legs. His pelvis had been partially crushed and three ribs had been snapped, presumably from constriction around his chest area. He also had cracked vertebrae in his lower back.

Kendrick knew exactly how those injuries had been sustained. Like everyone else in the upper echelon of the FBI, he'd been briefed following the Patuxent River incident. He had a written summary of the video that had been taken by a hidden camera in the Ritz-Carlton bedroom. He'd read how the Omegan had drugged him and seduced him and then compelled him to burn himself out during a seemingly endless bout of sexual enthusiasm. At the end, she'd nearly crushed him to death. No human woman had that kind of strength.

The analysts came to an even more startling conclusion. They thought she was really trying to hold herself back. Her body language, mostly the way she was biting her lower lip and the focused look in her eyes, told them that she was working hard to keep him alive. Yet they claimed that her reaction to his sexual frenzy looked real enough.

Kendrick's conclusion was that she was delivering a very carefully crafted message. 'Keep any knowledge of Omegans classified, or suffer the consequences. This is just a sample of what I'm capable of.'

Something about Geneva Som'ers bothered Kendrick. Extremely tall, very slender, and extraordinarily fit. Skin and hair too perfect, eyes too bright. Like one of those digitally-enhanced actresses where they'd removed all the flaws. Nobody should look that good. But it was the color of her skin that caused him to pause. That uniquely golden tan. He'd never seen that color come out of a bottle. Never under the sun.

He suddenly remembered where he'd seen that look before. On that airplane from LA the night of the Patuxent River attack.

A cold chill ran down his back as he punched the button on his intercom. "Evelyn, can you get me a copy of the stills that were taken during the Patuxent River attack."

"Sure, boss. Sally's got them over in Counter-Intelligence. Give me fifteen minutes."

Kendrick sat back in his chair as he considered the evidence in front of him. The rooftop cameras had seen the woman levitate without any apparent mechanical assistance, both coming and going. The analysts' best guess was that she had some kind of advanced implant – which made her cybernetic. Most likely, an antigrav technology that was more advanced than anything on Earth.

The military had tried to develop implants of various types over the years, but had given up and gone with either exoskeletons, or outright genetic manipulation. Implanted power sources had always been the problem. It was hard to contain that kind of energy inside a person's body. The woman who'd attacked Patuxent River had reportedly been radiating a lot of heat, even before the M21 burst hit her.

Clearly the Omegans were resistance to heat. Surviving an M21 burst was the human equivalent of taking a woman taking a half dozen .44 Magnum rounds in her bare chest at point blank range. Physics and physiology said it was impossible to survive such violence.

The bent window bars were just as hard to explain. The low-light camera had captured it very clearly. No obvious technology in this case. Based on the way her muscles tightened up so visibly, she was using simple physical strength. No technology. The problem was that she was almost as slender as a supermodel. Those bars each took

many tons of force to bend. They'd been designed to resist Talatan exoskeletons.

His staff had promptly matched the woman's picture with various surveillance shots done in Washington, and identified her as Geneva Som'ers, an ultra expensive escort girl with clients all the way into the White House. She cost a fortune for a single night. It wasn't clear why anyone would pay that for a single night.

Unless you'd met her. Kendrick had. At a party somewhere. It had taken him days to get her image out of his head, and for weeks, every woman's perfume he smelled sent a wave of desire washing over him. It had taken all his willpower to avoid dipping into his retirement funds and calling the number on the card in his wallet. He'd finally had the good sense to burn it. But the number was still rattling around in his head.

He saw his life flashing before his eyes. Thank God she'd been so horribly expensive. If he'd indulged himself, he would have to disclose his association with her at the beginning of this investigation. It could have cost him his career.

How many others were there? Men who'd been tempted but not restrained by money? How many men had indulged their desires and fallen under her power? Men whose careers were now in jeopardy? How far up the hierarchy had she slept? Were her victims being controlled by her even now? And what would her clients think when

the truth came out and they realized they'd been sleeping with the enemy? A hostile extraterrestrial. Someone not exactly human.

The intercom buzzed. He swiveled back around in his chair to push the button.

"I've got the pics, boss. Singular, actually. They only had one still, but it's clear enough."

"Bring it in."

Evelyn walked through the door and around his desk to stand beside him. She was early fifties, still pleasant looking, and sharp as a pin. She'd been a bit of an item around the FBI when she was younger, but she'd married one of the managers down in Finance. Happily as far as he knew. She knew everything there was to know about how to get things done in the FBI. He sometimes wondered where his career would have gone without her help.

"That is one totally gorgeous woman," Evelyn said as she laid the 8x10 photo on his desk. "Never seen anyone that slender and that fit at the same time. A supermodel with muscles."

Kendrick smiled up at Evelyn before looking at the picture. "Do you know what this 'supermodel' did?"

Evelyn nodded. "The girls talk. Apparently she wiped out a few Marine patrols, penetrated a high security facility and survived a burst from one of those new energy weapons. They're calling her Übergirl down on the second floor."

Kendrick started to smile, only to freeze as he looked down at the picture. His heart leaped. A very familiar face was staring back at him. It was the woman he'd seen on the plane when he'd arrived in Washington that night!

"Holy shit. Are you sure this is the right picture?"

"I had the same reaction at first, boss. But this is definitely her. The terror of Patuxent. Some kind of extraterrestrial, according to the scuttlebutt."

He took a deep breath, exhaling it slowly as his thoughts raced. He searched his memory for her name. He remembered getting it from the flight attendant. He turned to look back up at Evelyn. "They have a name for her?"

She shook her head. "Not that I've heard."

Kendrick's heart was really racing. "And you're taking this all in stride?"

Evelyn straightened up to look down at him. "Agent Howell, after twenty-eight years in the FBI, it would take more than a pretty face to surprise me. I mean, if someone is going to mess around with a woman's genes, why not make them look that way."

"That's very open-minded of you. Other women might feel a bit defensive."

"I'm just practical, Kendrick. That other woman, Geneva Som'ers, they got her look perfect. If you were going to create some kind of



superbeing who can infiltrate the power structure of Washington, that's exactly how you'd make her look. Most guys can't deal with gorgeous blondes with brains. Not ones as young as that. We won't even talk about how strong she's supposed to be. She'd tie most men up in little knots, literally if not figuratively." She smiled at him. "But not you of course."

A chill ran down Kendrick's back. He wasn't so sure about that. He remembered how she'd mesmerized him on that flight. That and the fact that it had taken him days to get Geneva out of his mind after that party. "You've got a point, Evelyn. Somebody went to a lot of trouble to mess with our heads."

"Big and little," she smirked.

Kendrick said nothing. One look at the picture was all it had taken to get it all going again. It took all his willpower to pull his gaze away. When he glanced up at Evelyn, he saw a worried look in her eyes.

"Don't let her looks go to your head, boss. Just window dressing. From what I hear, underneath that perfect skin, she's some kind of cybernetic killing machine."

Kendrick nodded, his thoughts reeling. Evelyn was just reporting on office gossip, but she might be right. And now there were two Omegans on his list, and they looked remarkably the same. Not their faces, they were different enough, but that glowing golden skin and those long legs. They could be sisters. They were definitely the most visually stunning women he'd seen.

Even stranger, he'd personally crossed paths with both of them. What the hell did that mean?

"Well, I have work to do. I'll leave you with your picture." Evelyn walked out to close the door behind her.

Kendrick sat back in his chair and stared out the window. He wasn't thinking about anything now. Just letting his brain idle. That was how he got most of his ideas.

He noticed it was trying to snow. Maybe they'd have one of those rare White Christmases in Virginia this year. He'd planned a small family get-together for the holiday's. Mary's side of the family. He'd lost touch with his own sister and her family. His parents had died years before.

His thoughts quickly came back to the case. What were the odds that he'd accidentally crossed paths with the only two Omegans on Earth? Zero. And if he'd seen two, then how many more were there? More likely they were working hard to get close to the movers and shakers in Washington. But that didn't include him. He was just a Special Agent. Nobody outside the agency even knew what he did for a living.

The good news was that their appearances were similar enough to profile. If there were others like them, he could now find them.

He decided it was time to personally watch the video from the Ritz. The analysts had gone through it and summarized what was on

it in their report. He'd heard that it wasn't an easy thing to watch. But he suddenly had to see it for himself.

“Evelyn, I’ll be down in the video briefing room. Tell Jameson I’m coming. Have him cue up the Ritz-Carlton clip.”

By the time he got down to the basement, the tech had the bit-stream ready. Kendrick was alone when it started playing. Despite the sterile atmosphere of the briefing room, he barely made it through the clip. He’d never seen such a naked display of extreme eroticism, nor a woman with such a perfect body. A body she knew how to use to please men. There wasn’t a misplaced gram of fat, not a wrinkle or flaw, no imperfections anywhere. She looked even better than she had in his dreams.

He struggled to imagine how she could simultaneously be that slender and feminine and that phenomenally strong. She moved exactly like the woman on the plane, possessing that same appealing mixture of a model’s erect stature and an athlete’s svelte motions. Svelte enough to wipe out an entire government facility.

He suddenly remembered Geneva’s flowery perfume from that party, and the mere thought of it sent a warm glow through his body. He squirmed in his seat and tried not to think about it. But he was suddenly too turned on to walk.

He tried to think logically. The clip confirmed that she’d used pheromic drugs on the Senator. And the Senator most definitely did more than merely smell it. His shockingly primitive sexual behavior,

his fall from any civilized norm, was undoubtedly the affect of an overdose. He'd behaved like some kind of wild animal in heat.

Did her other victims behave the same way? Impossible. There would have been other heart attacks. Other injuries. Clearly she'd used something stronger on Jackson. And just as surely, the Senator and his young friend from UCSD would remember nothing once they recovered from their near fatal close encounter. Definitely a Third-Kind.

Kendrick was convinced that Geneva was an intelligence agent. The other girl in the Senator's room had just been her lackey, and a nearly sacrificial one based on the bruises on her neck. He was convinced that Geneva had gone into that hotel room planning to kill them both. Something about her sad expression, the look in her eyes. Yet something else had held her back.

Human compassion?

Unlikely, given the Omegans murderous behavior in all other encounters. Maybe she was different. Maybe it was something he could work with.

He had to find the woman on plane. Her name suddenly came to him. Tala Laut. All he knew was that she'd boarded the plane in LA.

It was a good enough place to start. If they began to shadow Geneva and could find Tala in LA, then they'd lead them to the others. How many others, he had no idea. But if he'd met two, there had to more.

Lost in his work again, he was calm enough to walk. He headed back up toward his office, so lost in thought that he didn't even see the people he passed in hallways. He had a habit of falling so deeply into his cases that nothing else mattered. Mary had sometimes complained about that when he was on a tough case, but she'd understood it. She'd let him drift away only so far before tugging him back from his deep thoughts. She kept him sane. Now he just had his work. The most important case of his career.

He was sitting back in his office chair before he realized how he'd gotten there. He decided that the first thing to do was to find out how far Geneva's influence went in Washington. He picked up the phone to call the President's Chief of Staff. Between the White House office and the Secret Service, they'd know which of the President's staff were her clients. Anyone in contact with Geneva would have to be isolated, their loyalties suspect due to her drugs.

He was optimistic for the first time in a very long time. After three years of frustration, they finally knew something about who they were fighting. Even better, Geneva Som'ers didn't seem to be trained in tradecraft. She'd been careless. She clearly assumed that no one would suspect her of being something as bizarre as an extraterrestrial. It was just the kind of arrogance and overconfidence that would work in his favor.

His men would eventually pick up Tala's trail in LA, if that was where she lived. She was a very distinctive woman, although LA was

a terrible place to search for attractive women. Especially blondes. There were too many of them there. But if they confined their search to a narrow profile of women over five feet ten, with that same body shape and features, a narrow band of ages, that would reduce the list to a few hundred.

He felt alive for the first time since Mary's death. No matter whether Earth won or lost this war, at least he was going to give Project Archangel a fighting chance.

This was what he'd been born to do.

## **Chapter Nine**

*Sunday, November 24, 2019, 12:30pm, Oceanside, California*

Special Agent David Mansfield sat in the bleachers watching his son's High School fundraiser. It was a clear, hot day in LA. The morning marine layer had burned off an hour ago to reveal the naked Southern California sun. It beat down on him like a heat lamp. He dug a handkerchief out of his back pocket to wipe away the sweat on his forehead. Despite the heat, it was good to be home.

His new assignment was proving to be the most interesting one he'd ever had. He was one of the two US liaison agents assigned to Project Archangel. He and Matt Stevens. While Matt had been up in the mountains training with their agents, he'd spent the last two weeks at their Bern, Switzerland headquarters. There he'd undergone profile training, teaching him how to search for Omegans who might be living among the general population.

A lot of new information had come in during the last month. The agency was putting a high confidence on the profile.

Despite the excitement of the new job, he hadn't liked Switzerland. It was too cold, and the people had been too formal. Stiff even. At least in Bern. Matt said he'd enjoyed his stay up at Wildenhütte. He looked really relaxed. David kidded him about getting some Swiss booty while he was up there. Matt was single and late

twenties. He seemed to date an awful lot of women. A married man's fantasy.

While Bern had been too damn cold, LA was too hot. But at least it was home. Today's mission wasn't very complicated. Watching a tennis match with his son. Catching up on family life.

Down on the courts, retired tennis star John Macklin was playing a few games against the best students. The goal was to raise money for the Cancer Foundation. Every point he lost would put a thousand dollars into the fund.

Macklin quickly defeated the two top boys, one of them good enough to be ranked second in the state. He let the two of them win a few points to enrich the charity pot, but otherwise it was no contest. Macklin might be retired, but he still had his pride. He was clearly finding it hard to lose a point to a lesser player, even for charity.

The result was that the fund was still short of the goal when the scheduled matches ended. Then someone suggested he take on the school's top girl player. AnnMarie Helmstaedt. Macklin reluctantly agreed, the look in his face making it clear that he was wondering how he was going to gracefully give up a few points to someone with even less skill than the boys he'd just played. She was just a sophomore as it turned out.

David's son Chris and his friends whispered to each other as AnnMarie Helmstaedt appeared at courtside. David glanced at his son and smiled. Chris' eyes were glued on the girl. He still



remembered was it was like just before he started dating. Girls were suddenly the most important thing in the universe, even if he wasn't exactly sure what to do with them.

Smiling at the longing look in his son's eyes, he turned to glance down at the court. The girl who was warming up was dressed in yellow top and black Adidas shorts. Her blonde hair was braided into a single long ponytail. She looked nervous as she strode onto the center court. She also looked a lot older than fifteen.

"That's your AnnMarie?" he asked his son. He'd heard Chris and his friends talking about her in the car just that morning.

Chris nodded, unable to look away. "She's something, isn't she?"

"And she's just a sophomore?"

"Some girls grow up faster than others, Dad."

"I guess."

David found himself paying attention now. The girl was very tall and remarkably attractive. A poster child for what it meant to be young and fit. Except that when he was growing up, girls didn't have figures like that until they were eighteen. Must be all those growth hormones in the food or something he figured. She reminded him of a Russian tennis player who'd retired from the game way back in 2004. Kournikova somebody. He'd been young enough to be fascinated by her at the time. This girl looked like her clone, except for being taller. He chuckled. Like father, like son. Similar taste in dream women.

Macklin hit AnnMarie some easy shots, but she returned them like bullets. He had to scramble to avoid losing the point. Clearly she was going to play him hard. She was quick on her feet. Macklin gave up a couple of obligatory points for the charity, but found himself having to push harder and harder to keep up with her. Surprisingly, she won the first game. Then the second. The sponsors were ecstatic. Macklin was only supposed to give up a dozen points all day. He'd now given up eighteen. The charity event was going to be an unprecedented success.

By the third game it was clear that both players were going at it full tilt. The game went to deuce three times, but Macklin couldn't break her. The girl was all over the court, leaping high into the air, moving faster than Macklin could. What she lacked in skill she made up for in raw athleticism and stamina.

When she finally won the last point in an overhead smash that would have put the famous Serena Williams to shame, Macklin exploded into his characteristic bad temper. He threw his racket and stalked off the court. A very stunned AnnMarie looked up as everyone applauded. Chris and his friends were jumping up and down and screaming.

David was intrigued. Not only by the way she'd won the match, but by how well she fit the Omegan profile he'd just learned. She had the look, and she'd just shown unusual athleticism, a key recognition point in the training. On a whim, he decided to check her out. Just for

practice, he told himself. Deadly extraterrestrials didn't attend his son's school. And the first girl his son had taken an interest in wasn't some super girl from a distant star. An amusing enough thought all on its own.

He found his way down to the courtside to collect the towel she'd used to wipe the sweat from her face. He took it into the office on Monday and logged it into the Forensics lab. Then he promptly forgot about it. Barely two weeks into his new assignment, he wasn't going to be the one to find the extraterrestrials that half the world was looking for.

A week later, he was called to Washington DC to meet with one of the senior agents. Kendrick Howell. A dozen staff members slapped him on the back and congratulated him before he realized why he was there. Kendrick finally confided that the DNA traces on the towel were alien. The sequencer had revealed a complex matrix of active gene sites that were a dozen times more complex than human. It was a nearly perfect match for the DNA they'd taken from the first Omegan they'd found. The woman in Washington who was involved in that Senator Jackson mess.

Two weeks of frantic activity and a great deal of discrete surveillance followed David's discovery. The case was personally handled by Kendrick Howell. He directed his agents, David now included, to observe her discretely, the goal being to uncover more of her kind. He told them to be especially alert for the name Tala Laut.

She was apparently an Omegan who was believed to live in the LA area.

Unlike the other Omegans, AnnMarie Helmstaedt wasn't engaged in any unusual activities. Just normal school things. David was detailed to check out her mother, a Margot Helmstaedt. He discretely collected some DNA samples from her workplace, she was a program manager at Lockheed, which confirmed she was Omegan too. Alarmingly, he found that she was working on the M21 plasma rifle project. In fact, she'd been the one who'd pushed the project through. She'd spent a lot of time with the engineers. One of them confided that she'd had some very interesting ideas, one of which had helped them break through a major technical stumbling block.

Kendrick was intrigued when David told him. If there was one true use for an M21, it was to try to stop the Omegans. It wasn't perfect, but with slighter greater power, it might do the job. And Margot Helmstaedt seemed determined to perfect it. Why would an Omegan do that? Did she plan to equip other Omegans with them? That didn't make sense. If there was one thing that had always been consistent about Omegan attacks, it was that they didn't use weapons. They were the weapon.

Kendrick's investigation expanded. His men had intercepted encrypted Net traffic between Geneva Som'ers' home in Washington and a location in Los Angeles. A house in Coldwater Canyon.

The investigation was starting to come together when the worst thing that can happen to a field agent occurred. He got a call to fly back to Washington. The Senate Oversight committee wanted to talk to him.

He took the red-eye back to see Fred. Fred was an old friend and also the current FBI Director. Seven members of Congress were waiting in Fred's office when he arrived. Fred opened the meeting by telling Kendrick that Senator Jackson had just suffered another heart attack and had died.

The Senators were clamoring for action. They'd heard enough to know that the FBI was undertaking a major investigation into the incident in the Ritz-Carlton. They'd heard the so-called 'extraterrestrial' rumors. They'd thought highly of Senator Jackson before the newspapers crucified him. They smelled a rat the way only a rat can.

It got worse. They didn't need to remind Anderson that the President had just been re-elected and was debating making changes in his cabinet and key agency heads. But they did anyway. Anderson had better play ball or he was going to be out. They put all their cards on the table. Cards they shouldn't even have had. They wanted the Omegan in custody and tried for murder.

Anderson gave them the standard line. Jackson's death was due to natural causes heart attack. No foul play except maybe the Senator's. The young hooker.

It was a tactical error. The Senators already knew too much. Somebody had leaked details of the investigation. They started to skin Anderson alive.

Kendrick stepped in to save his boss. He confided that they were indeed investigating an Omegan in the Jackson case. But then he argued passionately that her arrest would blow the entire investigation. There were bigger things at stake. All those dead military officers. The destruction of nuclear weapons. He stopped at sharing the CIA's latest theory about the Omegans opening the way for an invasion.

The Senators shook their heads. They wanted justice. More than that, they wanted their old friend vindicated.

Anderson went to his trump card. He told them how powerful the Omegans were. That they might not be able to arrest her if they tried, and there might be further loss of life. And even assuming they were successful, prisons weren't designed to hold people who could bend steel in their bare hands.

The Senators still insisted. They weren't being logical. They were being political. Kendrick watched his boss try one last time to talk them out of it. But he was weakening. The Senators would find a way to go over him if he refused. His career would be ended for no reason. Still Fred refused. He was too much of an FBI man to queer this big of a case. Kendrick saw Fred grit his teeth as he prepared to go down with the ship. He didn't have a choice.

Kendrick gave him one. He claimed that Jackson's attacker was a girl who lived in LA. Even younger than the one they'd found at the scene.

It was a desperate gamble. He'd hoped that the suggestion of another underage girl would back the Senator's off. It didn't. They were angry that they'd hadn't been brought into the loop earlier. They were the Oversight Committee after all.

The only thing good about throwing AnnMarie to the wolves was that she didn't seem connected to the rest of the Omegans. There was a slight chance that her arrest wouldn't blow the bigger case, especially if they kept it out of the News.

But clearly, the Senators wanted an Omegan. So he'd give them one. Fred shook hands and agreed. A deal with the devil.

On December 7, a fateful day by any accounting, a specially reinforced SWAT team surrounded the tennis courts at Oceanside High School. They had special hardened-steel manacles, high-voltage Tasers that were strong enough to kill a normal person, and two M21's in reserve. Also a half dozen soldiers in exo-skeletons and Talatan armor. That gave them each the strength of ten men.

Kendrick still feared the worst: a lot of dead agents. But the girl had never displayed the kind of strength that the others had. Maybe it was something that developed at a later age.

She was also an innocent, but it didn't matter. This wasn't a legal case. This was survival. Bigger issues at stake. Or so he told himself. A bunch of rationalizations. He wasn't happy when he flew to LA. But given what he was going to do to the girl, he wanted to be there.

He owed her that much at least.



## Chapter Ten

*Monday, December 7, 2019, 6:30am, Oceanside, California*

"Mom, I'm leaving. Got early practice today."

Margot Helmstaedt stepped out of the bathroom, toweling her hair dry. "We have to talk tonight, honey. You know what I mean."

AnnMarie said nothing as she turned and walked out the door. They'd had a big fight two days ago and she was still mad at her mom. She'd been reading the news for weeks. All the talk about Omegans. The attacks on the military installations. Senator Jackson's press conference and that article in the Times. Then his heart attack. The big scandal with that underage hooker.

It didn't take a genius to realize that there had to be other Shaadar on Earth. But her mother had refused to even talk about it. AnnMarie had insisted. It had gotten ugly.

It was Karen's mom's turn to drive this morning. AnnMarie got into the back seat and put her headphones on, pretending to work on some last minute homework. But her thoughts were racing in a dozen directions. Shaadar. Her mother had used that word for the first time during their fight. But she'd seen it before. In some papers in her mom's room years before. The papers had been sitting next to that box of strange jewelry. Both had since disappeared.

What was a Shaadar? Was her mom one? Was she? Were Shaadar the same thing as Omegans?

That made more sense than anything else she'd come up with. When she thought about it, the evidence had been all around her while growing up. The ride that had gone off the tracks in Disneyland. She was the only person who wasn't hurt. Then that fall in Kings Canyon. Nearly sixty feet, landing on those rocks. Everyone had rushed over to her, thinking she'd have broken bones, maybe worse. But she'd walked away from that too. She hadn't even gotten as much as a bruise. No skinned knees. None of the usual stuff that other kids got. She'd taken to wearing Band-aids on imagined cuts when she was eight just because other kids did.

Her mom would never talk about it. She said she was just lucky. Thick skin. But AnnMarie had read stuff about those Russian and Chinese genetics experiments. Back before the Pulse. Some people called them mutants, but she knew that wasn't correct. Genetically engineered was more correct.

Was that what she was? Engineered. Some kind of machine? No way.

When they arrived at school, AnnMarie stayed behind in the locker room as the other girls went out on the court for practice. She walked up to the chinning bar on the wall. The one all the girls on the team struggled with. This morning she reached up and gripped it with one hand instead of two. She concentrated on doing one very slow

pull-up. Her feet stayed on the floor. She'd seen a couple of the girls in gymnastics could this, but they were half her size. She gritted her teeth and tried harder. She felt a funny twinge in her chest and she was suddenly rising. She chinned herself, and then hung there for a moment. This was cool.

The funny feeling in her chest got worse. That burning feeling that always made her stop. She dropped back the floor and stretched. The pain was right under her sternum. She thought there was something wrong with her heart, but her mother had refused to take her to a doctor. She said it was a heart murmur, but if she didn't make it hurt, she'd be O.K. The result was that AnnMarie always held back whenever she felt the burn. It never happened when she was playing tennis.

She reached up and grabbed the bar again. She did another rep. This one was easier. Her chest burned worse, but it got easier to do each pull-up. She did a half dozen reps. She stared at her arm as she worked it. Her muscles were so big. She knew it shouldn't have been possible to do this many, but she was. Her chest felt like it was almost on fire now. She was sweating. But instead of getting harder, it was getting easier and easier to do the pull-ups. There couldn't be anything wrong with her heart if she got stronger when it hurt. Could there? All she knew for sure was that she felt stronger the more reps she did. She was on her fifty-third rep before she was finally convinced that the hotter her chest got, the stronger she got.

She dropped back to the floor. 53? She suddenly felt a little scared. That wasn't humanly possible. Tonight's talk with her mom was going to be intense.

She turned to look at herself in the mirror and made a muscle. Her biceps looked bigger than usual. Which meant it looked way too big. She'd struggled enough with early development the last two years. The last thing she needed was to have muscles popping out all over the place. She'd been the envy of her friends when she went shopping for a b-cup bra on her thirteenth birthday. Other girls were just getting out of training bras. Some just into them. The boys had really noticed her, but she wasn't ready for that.

Unlike Maureen, the other girl with breasts as large as hers, she wasn't fat. To the contrary, she was seriously worried about having too much muscle. Miss Mathews, her coach, said she had the figure of a nineteen year old, and the muscles of a pro tennis player. Her comments creeped AnnMarie out. Most of the girls thought Miss Matthews was a lesbian or something.

She sighed and grabbed her bag to head for the courts. She was halfway there when she paused at the door of the boy's gym. She still felt so strong, so pumped up. And suddenly so curious. She looked up and down the empty hallway before slipping inside to turn the lights on in the weight room. The bench press was still set where Cory had left it. He was the strongest guy on the football team. A senior. She had a crush on him, but he didn't seem interested in her.

A senior dating a sophomore? That was perverted. Unless it was just for sex. Some girls in her class thought it was cool to hang with the jocks. The seniors. But it came with a price. AnnMarie wasn't that kind of girl.

She dropped her bag on the floor and slipped under the bar, laying on her back on the cold bench. She counted the weights. 400 pounds. Cory had been showing off again. She used her weaker left arm this time, her right hand resting her chest. It was still really hot, but she wanted to feel if the burn increased if she worked even harder. Taking a deep breath, she straightened her arm and unbenched the bar. It was really heavy, but not too heavy. That was amazing enough all on its own. She'd watched Cory strain to do this with both hands, veins popping out, his muscles huge. He had great muscles. She was just a girl.

She lowered the bar to her chest and started doing one-handed reps. She grunted out three of them before her arm began to shake.

O.K, she was a very strong girl. Like the pull-ups, it was really hard at first. Then she felt her chest heating, the burn starting inside. The bar got lighter. Ten reps later she was starting to worry. She could really feel the heat rising under her top. Like a furnace. Even stranger, the bar felt like it was made of Styrofoam. She reached behind herself and effortlessly rebenched it.

Her body felt almost weightless as got up and walked over to the mirror. She didn't look any different. Curious, she pulled her red halter

top and sports bra off. Standing there topless, she still couldn't see anything, except that her breasts felt really hot. Kind of tingly. Nice. Her left arm looked a bit pumped up too, but that was about it. Well, and maybe her nipples were a bit hard. That was embarrassing. She could actually feel the heat reflecting off the mirror and back into her face. She wet her finger and touched it between her breasts, right over the middle of her sternum. The moisture sizzled and a tiny plume of steam rose.

Her eyes opened wide. That was impossible! She should have third-degree burns at that temperature.

She leaned closer, almost touching the mirror, looking for any sign of the heat. Nothing. It was like those accidents where she never got hurt. Like the way she'd grown up too fast. And now her chest got as hot as a fry pan when she worked out hard. That was very weird.

But it made one thing clear. She now knew for sure that she was the thing her mother called a Shaadar. She had to be. Whatever the hell they were. Mutants. Lab experiments gone wrong. Genetically engineered beings. Cybernetics.

Cyborgs? She thought of the Terminator movies and laughed. She wasn't going there.

Whatever they were, she was one. Was her mother one too? She'd never done anything unusual that AnnMarie knew about.

The real question now was what to do about it. First of all, they were going to talk about it tonight. If her mom tried to change the subject, she'd show her what she'd learned. She'd make herself hot.

AnnMarie giggled as she briefly imagined standing in the garage, topless, flexing her muscles. Doing something amazing with one of her dad's barbells or something. Whatever. She looked down at her hard nipples again. O.K, that would be a bit too weird. But one way or another, she was going to learn about this big secret tonight. The one she suddenly realized she'd been waiting to learn her whole life.

She glanced up at the clock. Shit. 7:38. She was really late for practice. Miss Matthews was probably going berserk. Pulling her top back on, she ran toward the courts.

She ran faster than she ever had before.

## Chapter Eleven

*Monday, December 7, 2019, 4:05pm, Oceanside, California*

Kendrick sat in his office reviewing the video of that morning's arrest. It had gone reasonable well, considering.

His men had been worried at first when the girl didn't show up for tennis practice on time. They were about to abort the mission when AnnMarie ran out on the court, wearing a tiny pair of red shorts and halter. A tennis outfit, but one no fifteen year old girl should have been wearing to practice. She was young, but was obviously struggling to deal with her rapid maturity.

The agents moved in quickly. She never saw them coming, but she still put up a good fight, even going so far as to fight off the exoskeleton-equipped cops for a few minutes. Her raw strength against theirs. The wearers had ten times their normal strength, and they were grown men. Soldiers. That alone proved she was an Omegan. But she didn't show the kind of strength the others had during the attacks on the military installations. He'd have been dealing with casualties if she had.

Still, AnnMarie almost got away, only to finally go down under a wave of officers in Talantan body armor. They locked the huge manacles around her ankles and wrists, and then wrapped her in enough case-hardened chain to form a cocoon. It took six men to



drag her steel-wrapped body down the stairs and throw her into the highest security vault in the basement of the Federal Building in Westwood. They left the chains and manacles on her.

Kendrick personally led the interrogation. As he'd expected, AnnMarie seemed to be genuinely confused about why she was there. But she was definitely one of them. He found himself staring into the same mesmerizing eyes as Geneva Som'ers. He had to work to keep his thoughts clear. Fortunately, he didn't sense that perfume that Geneva had worn. That made it a lot easier.

The question at hand, was whether her apparent ignorance sincere. Or just training. There was one way to find out. He authorized using some CIA techniques. Drugs. Something no judge would allow to be used on a US citizen. Especially a minor. He knew he was on dangerous ground. He made a mental note to have Legal check to see if extraterrestrials were covered by any laws. He hoped not. But if AnnMarie had been born in the US, that could be a problem.

The CIA technician tried to give her a variety of truth drugs, babble juice in trade jargon, but he couldn't pierce her skin with his needles. He resorted to administering the drugs through a mask, but she held her breath for an amazing thirty minutes. When she finally took a gasping breath, the drugs only made her dizzy. She refused to say a word after that.

Kendrick wasn't worried. She would in time. They always did.

Unfortunately, he didn't have time. He had to deal with her mother now.

He instructed the agents to keep their distance from her. Margot Helmstaedt worked at the Lockheed facility in Manhattan Beach and she fit the Omegan profile even better than AnnMarie. Kendrick was afraid of her. She also looked like she knew how to tap into whatever power source it was that the Omegans used during their attacks.

After the school called Margot to report her daughter's arrest, something about an immigration issue, Margo called all the police stations. The rank and file cops didn't know what she was talking about. INS was clueless. Nothing unusual there. Margot finally left work and started her own search, going to the places AnnMarie frequented. No one had seen her.

Then someone screwed up. One of the agents hooked his radio link into the speaker in his car. His window was down.

Kendrick knew they were in trouble when the agent whispered into his mike that Margot had paused on the sidewalk fifty feet in front of him. He mentioned the radio speaker. He said she'd brushed the hair from her ears and was just listening. The speaker was off now. She'd turned around. Searching for something.

Kendrick had a pretty good idea what. His agent, Jim Peters, was about to be made. Peters reported that Margot was staring straight at him, but he was too far away for her to really see him. Kendrick said to go anyway. Get out of there. He was in danger.

Peters jammed the car into gear and floored it. Margot saw him coming and stepped into the street. Peters nearly ran her over.

Things got confusing after that. Margot waved for the car to stop, but the agent raced past her, still accelerating. Then she did something completely impossible. She leaped an astounding hundred yards down the street to land directly in front of his car. She lowered her shoulder and threw herself into the right front bumper like she was trying to tackle the government-issue Ford. The collision at sixty miles per hour sent plastic and glass flying. The air bags inflated and the car spun out of control to slide into a ditch. Margot leaped back to her feet to rip open the locked door and pulled Peters out of before anyone could stop to help. The two of them disappeared from the scene of the accident.

Kendricks waited an hour. Nothing. No other agents had picked up the trail. He was just about to put out an APB with the local cops when the phone rang. The excited voice of the guard at the front entrance shouted that someone had disarmed him and was headed up the elevator. A tall blonde. She was dragging one of their agents behind her. Peters.

Before he could but the phone down, Margot Helmstaedt burst into his office. She jerked Peters through the door behind her, holding the frightened agent by his wrist. She unceremoniously threw him into a chair.

"Where the fuck is my daughter?"

Kendrick barely had the presence of mind to note the auspiciousness of the event. It wasn't the best opening for a First Contact with an extraterrestrial race. Nothing like what he'd planned. But it was still an opening.

Instead of answering, Kendrick's found himself staring at Margot. The daughter had been cute, but Margot was a truly stunning woman. As tall as the other two he'd met, Tala and Geneva, but a bit curvier. Not quite as lean. She wore a white sundress, spaghetti straps, flowers along the low neckline. But it was her eyes that drew his. They were like blue lasers. Just like her daughter's. Just like the other's.

He swallowed hard as the reality of what he was doing came back to him. It was entirely possible that he might not survive this meeting. He pressed two buttons under his desk as he rose to his feet. The first button for the hidden camera. The other to ensure he had some firepower ready if things went bad.

He held out his hand. "I'm sure we can work this out, Mrs. Helmstaedt." She just glared at him, crossing her arms under her breasts, studying him like he was some kind of bug. He tried not to stare down at her. He finally waved her toward the other chair.

"Why don't you have a seat, Mrs. Helmstaedt."

"Do you have her?" Margot asked again, still standing. Kendrick noted that she had an incredible figure. He blinked that thought away before he answered.

"Yes."

"Do you mind telling me why? What has she done? I'm her mother. Why wasn't I called?"

"Please, Margot, sit down."

Margot responded to his use of her first name. She angrily sat down in the chair beside Peters. He leaned as far away from her as he could. She glanced at the nameplate on his desk. "O.K. I'm sitting, Agent Kendrick Howell. And you've obviously be sticking your nose into my daughter's life and mine if you already know my name."

"The gig is up, Margot. We know who and what you are."

"And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, for one, I know you weren't born on Earth."

Margot laughed. "I know the Pulse burned a few things out, but your brains?"

"The attacks on the military installations. Senator Jackson's death. All of it. You're part of that."

Margot said nothing for a long moment. She leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs. Her skirt was very short. She had incredible legs. Kendrick struggled to keep his eyes on hers. "Well, if that's true, Agent Howell, then you know you and your lackey here are both dead men."

Kendrick forced himself to stay calm. Peters tried to get out of his chair, but Margot's hand on his knee held him down. She squeezed it

hard enough to make him wince. Kendrick rested his chin on his hands, trying desperately to look relaxed. He knew he couldn't show any fear. Not here, in his office. It was an FBI thing. He flipped a mental coin and decided to go with his favorite theory. "You're not with the rest of them, Margot. In fact, I think you're trying to avoid them."

"Assuming I'm one of them."

"I have a video of your daughter's arrest. I could show it to you. Do you have any idea how many men it took to subdue her?"

Margot sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly. "And do you realize that such an arrest would never work with me, or any other adult?"

Kendrick nodded; glad she'd dropped her pretense of ignorance so quickly. "I've seen the reports on two others. Geneva Som'ers. Tala Laut."

Margot looked impressed. "You have been busy. Then you know your men can't stop me?"

"That's why we're talking."

She straightened back up in her chair. "I want my daughter out of here. Then we can talk."

"A Senator was killed. I've got half a dozen Senators who want blood. We have a problem."

"Correction. You have a problem."

"If you really are different than the others, then we need to work together to solve this."

Margot stood up. "I don't work with anyone. And you are in more danger than you can possibly imagine. If any of the others realize what you know, they'll come for you like they do those officers."

"Unless you help me."

Margot laughed a second time. "Help you? You've arrested my daughter. Locked her up God knows where. That's hardly the way to get my cooperation."

"I can return her. A deal. But not right now."

"I don't need any deals. I'm perfectly capable of getting her on my own. Just tell me where, and nobody will get hurt."

"You can't get to her. She's locked in a cell. In restraints."

"I'm not impressed with your jail cells. Or your handcuffs."

"Come on. Talk to me, Margot. Let's work this out."

"Not here. Not like this." Margot turned and headed for the door, only to have a dozen agents burst through it. They'd been watching and listening via the camera. They trained their weapons on her, shouting for her to lay on the floor, hands behind her back.

"Stand down," Kendrick shouted to the men. "I've got this under control."

It was too late. Especially given Margot Helmstaedt's current mood. If the agents had any idea that she was in her Aur'a, or even what an Aur'a was, they'd have run for their lives.

Margot turned back to glare at Kendrick. "More of your charming negotiation techniques, Agent Howell?"

"No, just wait. It's all a mistake."

"Wait while you get more men with more guns?"

Before Kendrick could reply, Margot's outline blurred. The agents yelped as they each felt a hard smack against their gun hand. Their weapons clattered one after the other onto the top of Kendrick's desk. Only one agent was quick enough to get a shot off. The three-shot burst knocked Margot backward, but she caught herself halfway to the floor. She blurred again, and the shooter screamed and fell to his knees cradling a broken wrist.

Margot Helmstaedt's image returned to sharpness. She was standing beside Kendrick's desk, her hands on her hips, breathing hard. Kendrick stared down at the pile of guns on his desk.

"You men and your silly weapons," she said angrily, almost shouting. "These are dangerous for Normals. Innocents could have been hurt."

"But not you?"

"No, not me." She emphasized her point by picking up two of the weapons and squeezing them. The steel gave off a funny groan



before she dropped them back on the desk. They were visibly crushed, the imprints of her fingers in them. The only sound in the room was now the whooshing AirCon and a dozen pounding hearts.

Margot saw to see the fear in the agent's eyes. Beneath that, shock, amazement, and intimidation. She turned to look down at Kendrick. He was smiling like a man who'd just been vindicated. His heart was racing, but his emotions were under control. Something he was obviously working hard at.

Not so the others. She wrinkled her nose as the stench of male sweat filled the room. She tasted the sharpness of adrenaline on her tongue. Then more than adrenaline. Kendrick's eyes had moved from her hands to the bullet holes in her top. The impacts still stung, but she wasn't going to tell him that. Better to let him think that they couldn't hurt her. His scent was suddenly sweeter. Muskier too. She knew what that meant.

"You'd better not think like that when you look at my daughter."

Kendrick looked startled. "I don't..."

She picked up one of the guns and slowly twisted it, like she was wringing out a washcloth. The gunsteel gave off a high-pitched squeal. "And unless you want me to use these same hands to wring your men's necks, you'll tell me where my daughter is." She leaned over Kendrick to set the ruined gun back on his desk.

The other agents cowered away from her. It was a clear enough threat, given the brutal deaths of all those military officers. And the crushed guns. Or the smoking bullet holes over her left breast.

Kendrick rose to his feet to face her. His eyes were inches from hers. He rose slightly on his toes to match her height. "If you were going to kill us, Margot, you'd already have done it. But your daughter stays with me. At least for another day. I've got some things to work out with Washington."

Margot turned to grab the agent with the broken wrist. She lifted him off the floor by his neck and shook him like a rag doll. "Tell me where she is and I'll let you live."

Kendrick spoke up. "She's bluffing, LeCroix. Don't say a word."

The terrified agent was too frightened to think. He'd read horror stories about Omegans. He felt his feet dangling. He felt her fingers closing tighter. He stared bug-eyed at the twisted gun, and gestured downward with his good hand.

Before anyone could take another shuddering breath, Margot tossed him against the wall and ran out the door. The building shook violently. Kendricks ran out of his office to see Margot throwing her bare shoulder against the locked fire door leading to the basement. The steel door bent nearly in half. She stabbed her outstretched fingers into the reinforced doorframe, and violently tore it open, hinges and shattered framework flying across the office. Her dress tore as jagged metal caught it. She threw the door behind her. It spun

around on the marble floor like a top. She disappeared by diving headfirst down the stairs.

The building started to shake like an earthquake had hit. Kendrick lost his footing and went down hard. Computer monitors and paperwork tumbled from desks. He huddled up to avoid the worst of it. The secretaries screamed. Then an even louder scream echoed up the stairway. It was the sound of tortured steel being bent. Two final powerful blows shook the building and then all was quiet.

Kendrick cautiously descended the stairs to find that the cell door had been ripped apart, the bars twisted as if they'd been made of rubber. There was a ragged hole in the concrete foundation beside it. Shattered links of chain lay everywhere. Also bits and pieces of Margot's white dress, and AnnMarie's red tennis outfit. He picked up the two halves of the manacles and stared at them. The steel had been stretched and pulled like it was little more than warm taffy.

Don't ever piss of a girl's mother, he chided himself as he carried the manacles back toward his office. He walked in a daze, his thoughts racing. Miraculously, and totally uncharacteristic for an Omegan attack, no one had died. Other than LeCroix's broken wrist, and Peters bent pride, no one had even been hurt.

But he'd been right about one thing. Margot wasn't like the others. Neither was her daughter. They may not realize it yet, but he knew that the Helmstaedt's were going to be critical to Earth's

defense. He knew it in his bones. He just had to figure out how to get their cooperation.

Then he thought of Washington. There was going to be hell to pay trying to explain how the girl had gotten away. Fred was going to have a really bad day with the Senators.

He didn't care. Fred could manage. What was far more important was that he knew where the key lay.

He just had to figure out how to get it.

## **Chapter Twelve**

*Saturday, December 12, 2019, 2:00pm, Westwood Federal Building, Los Angeles*

An army of analysts poured over the Helmstaedt's background data, looking for clues as to where they might have gone after they left the Federal building. They hadn't returned home or to school or job.

They'd already learned that AnnMarie's days had been filled with the same kinds of activities that occupied any other smart, pretty girl in an American high school. She held an A- average and was a member of the Student Council. She was a member of the girl's dive team and the school's top female tennis player. She was nationally ranked. She was five foot eleven inches tall and weighed a very fit

129 pounds. Her long hair was sunshine blonde and she was blue-eyed.

In happy contradiction to the arrogance that often came with such beauty, people reported that AnnMarie wasn't self-absorbed or vain. She showed no hint of having any kind of ego. Instead, she was self-effacing and outgoing, often volunteering at a homeless shelter in downtown LA. There she served food to the gray men and women of the streets while sharing her rare beauty and some of her remarkable energy with them, her bright eyes and glowing hair a beacon of bright promise among the ranks of those who had given up hope. She was also a Big Sister to some girls down in Watts who lived in foster homes while waiting to be adopted.

Her mother had married into a very large family when AnnMarie was two years old. Margot's husband, Peter Helmstaedt, was a sports reporter for a local TV station. His children from a previous marriage, Allan and Jennifer, were one year older and younger respectively than AnnMarie. The marriage had immersed the two aliens in a huge extended family of cousins, aunts and uncles, even grandparents. Perfect cover.

Something had gone wrong recently, however, and Peter and Margot were now estranged. He was living down in Anaheim with his kids. When they approached him, he refused to talk. He said he'd never heard of Omegans and denied that his adopted daughter or estranged wife had any special abilities.

No one else in AnnMarie's extended family appeared to have any unusual talents, and they were equally close-mouthed when it came to questions about AnnMarie and her mother. They all knew something, Kendrick realized, but nobody wanted to be the one to spill the beans.

He was sitting in his borrowed Westwood office, debating how to coerce them, when someone knocked on his door. He started to get to his feet when AnnMarie Helmstaedt walked through the front door to sit down in front of his desk. She was dressed in denim, her hair tied off in two long ponytails. She looked very young. Still those dazzling eyes.

"So, Mr. Howell. Do you have any jobs open? The kind maybe a genetically-tweaked extraterrestrial super girl might be able to fill." He could see that she was trying to keep a straight face.

Kendrick swallowed hard, and nodded.

She held out her hand, and just like that, it was done.

It was the biggest coupe in Kendrick's career.

He had his key.

Now he had to find the lock.

## Chapter Thirteen

*Wednesday, December 16, 2019, 10:00am, Groom Lake Special Operations Area 51*

A flurry of activity began, all of it circling around AnnMarie. A dozen agencies tried to get involved. Kendrick found himself hard pressed to keep control of his asset.

The CIA talked Anderson into borrowing AnnMarie for a week of testing. They moved her to Groom Lake in Nevada. The fabled Area 51. Kendrick was furious. He wasn't even authorized into the facility.

Anderson sent him the reports each day. Unlike when she'd first been captured, AnnMarie now appeared to have all her mother's abilities. She explained to the CIA that her mother had told her how to use her implants so she could protect herself. She'd since learned how to fully enter what she called her Aur'a. Some kind of empowered state.

The CIA put her through a series of tests at Groom. The results were unbelievable. She could fly, using some kind of antigrav that had been grafted into her body. Barely supersonic, but that was impressive enough. She had tremendous strength – the team couldn't measure how much with the equipment they had. Clearly she needed to be examined by experts in the field. That meant Project Archangel.

The CIA turned her back over to the FBI. That put her back into Kendrick's control. He in turn contacted Matt Stevens, the agent he'd assigned to Project Archangel's training center in Switzerland. He sent him along with a team of medical experts to meet her at Reichter Labs in New Mexico.

The Archangel doctors poked and prodded her for days. The resulting report asked more questions than it answered. They couldn't draw any blood, a problem they had with several of their younger Gens, so they resorted to Magnetic Resonance Imaging and CATSCANS. They discovered she had a biomechanical construct woven into the bones of her pelvis. It appeared to have been implanted at birth and had grown with her bone structure. She called it her Aer'ie. Another device was located behind her sternum. Her Aur'a'lenz. It was connected to her heart and apparently sent some kind of energy hormone to her muscles.

She was technically a cybernetic organism. Cyborg for short. Unlike the Terminators in the movies of the same name, which really were androids, part of Hollywood's ignorance, she was the real thing. Generations more advanced than anything Project Archangel had even dreamed of.

They struggled to find her physical limits. She burned out the exercise gear that had been specially created for the Gen kids. She broke their weight machines. The medical team gave up and turned her over to a research group at Reichter which specialized in



weapons and tactics. Their goal was to find if she had any weaknesses.

AnnMarie just went along with whatever they asked of her. She was as curious as they were. Her mother had always told her to act normally around people. To never do anything to draw attention to herself. But she was drawing a lot of attention now. She wasn't acting normal. And she found she was enjoying it.

A contingent of brass flew down to Reichter Labs just before Christmas. A meeting with their newest agent. Kendrick finally got a chance to meet her again. He sat at the table as the members of the Select Intelligence Committee talked excitedly among themselves. They were talking about AnnMarie as if she was their own private science experiment. Kendrick new better. Her mother was still out there. One of these days, she'd come and retrieve her wandering daughter. He didn't want to be around when that happened.

AnnMarie walked into the room dressed in two-inch heels, a pair of faded denim jeans and an unbuttoned leather jacket. Beneath that, she wore a midriff-baring halter. She looked eighteen instead of fifteen. Kendrick was worried by that. She was growing up too fast. Her blonde hair hung long over one shoulder, and her face looked flushed, like she'd just been working out. They'd already learned that the flush came from being in her Aur'a.

Other than that, she looked exactly like a pretty teenage girl from LA should. She most certainly didn't look anything like some kind of deadly killing machine from outer space.

The dozen grimfaced men stared at her from behind the room-sized semi-circular table. They'd read all the reports. They studied her as she stood silently in the middle of the room. As usual, they found that she looked less intimidating than they'd expected. Prettier too. She also looked as bored as a teenage girl could. The endless interviews and tests were getting old by now.

Several of the men exchanged worried glances at her youth. She wasn't even sixteen. Others just looked skeptical. As a group, they didn't believe half of what they'd read about Omegans. Despite working for years to support Project Archangel, they wanted to see AnnMarie with their own eyes. No biological being should be able to do what she supposedly could do.

Dr. David Speirs, the Director of Weapons Research, rose from his seat at the center of the table. This was his show. He walked around the end and out into the lights. "Gentlemen. Let me introduce you to AnnMarie Helmstaedt. As we've been discussing, and thanks to Agent Howell here, she's decided to join our cause. After the recent devastating attacks on our weapons depots and centers of command and control, we may finally have a chance to fight back against the extraterrestrials."

"By having one of the Cosmos working for us?" Senator Havensworth said derisively. "Wouldn't that be a bit like asking Himmler's SS to help fight Hitler?" Cosmos was the derisive nickname that someone had given to the Omegans after it was observed that they all looked like Cosmopolitan cover girls.

"AnnMarie has lived her entire life on Earth, Senator. She was born naturally in the United States. By our laws, that may make her a US citizen. Legal is still working through the ramifications."

"Even though her mother was, and I remind you, is, an illegal alien?" The Senator emphasized the word 'illegal'. His party had long fought to change the overly liberal immigration laws of the US. "Dare I say, inhuman as well."

"Senator, until recently, AnnMarie didn't even know that she was an Omegan. Or more correctly, a Shaadarian. She lacked the knowledge to activate her implanted Aur'a'lenz. Her mother was trying to raise her as normally as possible."

"Her mother?" the Senator shouted. "You mean the woman who wrecked the field office in Westwood and nearly killed those agents?"

"A mother who was there to retrieve her very scared daughter, Senator. A daughter who was cruelly bound in chains and locked in a cell in the basement. Considering the situation, she acted like any worried mother might."

Kendrick winced. Speirs was getting carried away.

"Worried mothers don't tear apart jail cells," the Senator reminded him. "But considering the situation, lets drop that."

Speirs continued his prepared pitch. "Her mother was successful in raising AnnMarie as an American citizen, gentlemen. She knows only our culture, our society. Most importantly, AnnMarie was raised with our sense of morality." Speirs looked proudly at her. He knew it was rude to talk in front of her this way, but given her acute hearing, it was likely she'd hear it through closed doors anyway. He turned back to face the committee. "She's an American."

"Has she had all the cybernetic enhancements?"

Speirs nodded. "She has both the antigrav implant in her pelvis, and an Aur'a'lenz in her chest. As near as we can tell, they were both present at birth. The implants are as much biological as machine and they seem to grow with the rest of her."

"Which makes her just as dangerous as all the rest of her kind."

"Except that she's joined our side, Senator."

"Don't be so sure, Dr. Speirs," the Senator said derisively, staring contemptuously into AnnMarie's eyes. "Blood can be thicker than politics. And as you said, she isn't exactly human."

"Which I am grateful for. No human can stop a Shaadarian, Senator. At least not yet. But AnnMarie can."

"Show us."

Speirs turned to AnnMarie. "Would you mind?"

AnnMarie felt her skin crawl as the men stared at her like she was some kind of bug. She hated the way they talked about her. Like she was some kind of object. But she'd promised Kendrick that she'd cooperate. She took a deep breath. Anything was better than admitting she was wrong and going back to her mother.

She stepped to the side to widen her stance. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on establishing nerve control of the biomech antigrav. Her mother had given her a very brief course on how to use it, and she'd been refining that skill since. A faint buzzing sensation enveloped her body as the Elfron coils began drawing energy from the matter/anti-matter converter.

She opened her eyes and imagined herself floating weightless. Her weight promptly evaporated. She lifted both feet from the floor to cross her legs. The rest of her body remained perfectly motionless in the middle of the room. She'd been practicing this deceptively difficult maneuver for days. It had taken a while to figure out the secret. All she had to do was form the right mental image, and the rest just happened.

A shocked murmur traveled around the circular table. Speirs turned to look at the men's faces. He saw both fear and awe. He also saw the calculating look in some of their eyes. These were clever and determined men. They were part of what the President called his Omega Council. It was their job to find a way to defend the Earth from the aliens.

“So, gentlemen. Can we get started now?”

The Senator nodded to Dr. Max Bernard, the Executive Director of the lab. He walked forward to stand beside a Marine guard. "Hand me your weapon, Corporal."

The Marine looked startled.

Bernard held his hand out further. The Corporal looked at the men behind the table and saw the Senator nod. He unholstered his 9mm Beretta and handed it to Bernard. Bernard cycled the action and walked over to stand slightly behind and to the side of AnnMarie. He raised the gun and aimed it at the side of her head.

AnnMarie felt a flutter of panic as she turned to glance into the end of barrel. She'd been raised thinking that guns were lethal. She still hadn't gotten used to the fact that that rule didn't apply to her. She looked over toward Kendrick, and lifted one eyebrow. Was this part of the interview? Would it hurt her? He saw the concern in her face and nodded, mouthing the words "O.K." That made her feel a little better. Clearly he wouldn't let anything happen that would injure her. He kept telling her how she was Earth's salvation.

"It might sting, but it won't injure you," Speirs said as he saw the look in her face. AnnMarie held her breath and closed her eyes, suspecting it was actually going to hurt like hell.

She never heard the shot.

It felt like someone had swung a hammer into the side of her head. She flew forward in a cloud of blonde hair to land on her face

on the floor. A blinding pain ricocheted from one side of her skull to the other and her eyes were filled with a kaleidoscope of flashing lights. She struggled to get back to her knees, but the room spun around like a merry-go-round, dropping her back to all fours. She bit her lip and concentrated on making the room stop spinning. Then she thought of her Aur'a'lenz. She concentrated on making it hot, and was rewarded with a surge of tingling heat that radiated outward from her chest. The room slowed its spin. When the tingles reached her head, the pain stopped completely. She tossed her hair back and stood up. Her vision was a bit blurry.

She heard someone clapping behind her. Turning, she saw it was Bernard. The Marine was holding his 9mm at arms length, staring at it like it was some kind of snake.

"You see gentleman. She can't be injured by ordinary weapons. Stunned perhaps, but not hurt."

AnnMarie walked unsteadily back into the circle of light. She combed her fingers through her hair, and touched her finger to the impact point behind her ear. It was a little sore.

"One other little demonstration," Bernard said. He waved to a man standing along the far wall. "We have a bearing from the track mechanism of an M1A1 tank. Five pounds of solid steel."

The man tossed the bearing to AnnMarie, who caught it as lightly as a tennis player caught a ball. It was about the same size.

"O.K. Are you guys ready for this?" she asked innocently. She felt a bit more confident now. She'd seen their eyes open wide when she got up from the floor after the gunshot. Speirs turned to her and nodded.

"Here goes nothing."

AnnMarie lifted her hand and squeezed. Strong tendons strained visibly across her hand and wrist, and the funny feeling started to grow in her chest. She'd almost fallen out of her Aur'a again. A riot of tingling heat radiated outward, and the warm tingles traveling down her arm. The muscles of her forearm suddenly looked embarrassingly large. All angles and deep clefts. She ignored that as she concentrated on squeezing even harder. The steel promptly gave off a low keen and collapsed in her grip. She closed her fingers all the way, proudly watching the steel squishing out from between her fingers. She had to go slow, but the steel behaved like that modeling clay she used to work with in art class. Steady pressure and she could shape it into anything she wanted.

She finally released her breath and opened her hand to reveal the crushed bearing. The men behind the table leaned forward, staring, mouths open.

Speirs stepped forward to take the now star-shaped bearing from her. It was almost too hot for him to hold. He walked forward to set it on the table in front of the Senator. "Deforming this bearing, gentleman, required more than twenty tons of gripping force. And you



saw the minor effect the gunshot had on her. She will be a most effective agent."

A murmur went back around the table. The Senator finally cleared his throat. "O.K, I'm convinced. Let's activate her. When and where do we put her to work?"

## **Chapter Fourteen**

*Tuesday, December 24, 2019, 12:30pm, Amman, Jordan*

A bead of sweat ran down Tariq Nassir's forehead. It was midday and the air was still and heavy. He sat in the shuttered back room of the safe house in Amman, Jordan. The sun slanted through wooden blinds to illuminate the dusty air in shafts of golden light. The earthy smell of roasting coffee filled the air from the shop above him. That wonderful aroma was punctuated by the strong Arabic spices from the Egyptian restaurant next door.

Tariq was hungry, yet he dared not step outside. He'd entered the city during last night's sandstorm, one of the few times when it was safe for an expatriate Iraqi to be moving around Jordan. The Americans had lost control of their army after the Omegans massacred their officers, and their troops had gone rogue. Most of them had gone home by now, but a ragtag American army still fought for their own survival rather than for cause or country. They policed every major road intersection, collecting their so-called 'road taxes' to support themselves.

He was going to put an end to that. Once the rightful leadership of Iraq returned, they'd build an army strong enough to drive the last Americans out. The glorious soldiers of Islam would prevail. The ones

the Americans called Omegans. He refused to use that blasphemous Greek name. He knew them as the Mohad'gen. The holy warriors of Islam who had arisen from their sleep to kill his enemies. All he had to do now was to focus their mayhem on the last of the opposing Princes in Saudi Arabia.

He'd met one of the Mohad'gen. Her name was Arianna. A pretentious name, for Arianna had been the name of one of the greatest goddesses of ancient Persia. But if the Mohad'gen were indeed gods, then Arianna had perhaps risen herself.

Arianna always appeared properly dressed in her hijab, hiding her face and eyes behind the black fabric as she should. Her robes hid everything but her hands, which looked very strong. He'd lifted her fingerprints from a glass once, and his contact in Jordanian Intelligence had hacked into the FBI database to do a search. Her prints weren't on file.

Whoever she was, Tariq wasn't going to question Allah's fortune. The Mohad'gen had killed many his enemies, most of them Americans, and as the saying went, the enemy of his enemy was his friend. Especially since she'd delivered exactly what she'd promised.

Revenge.

Revenge for the American invasion of Saudi Arabia in 2011.  
Revenge for Saddam Hussein's capitulation way back in 2003.  
Revenge for Saddam's treachery in giving his country up to the hated infidels without a fight.

Tariq was no stranger to hatred or to revenge, for he'd commanded the Special Republican Guards in Baghdad before the fall. Saddam had directed him to save his troops, to have them melt away, prepared to fight another day. It had been the hardest thing Tariq had ever done, for he'd been spoiling to fight the Americans. But it was Saddam's vision that the Americans would relax, that they would pull most of their forces out, and then the Guards would rise up and retake Baghdad.

A flawed vision, for it did not allow for the American occupation army that had now lived in Iraq for sixteen years. Nor did it include the arrival of the Mohad'gen. The terrorists had started by killing most of the Princes and political leaders of the neighboring countries. Then they'd sought out the warlords and generals, many of whom still lusted to piece together their scattered armies.

They were squashed by the Mohad'gen as fast as they appeared. Tariq had survived the purge by virtue of being in Jordan at the time, digging some very deep holes for some very illegal weapons. He'd been one of the handful of survivors from Saddam's inner circle back in 2003. He'd since fought in Jordan and finally in Saudi Arabia. Yet the Americans had won every battle, with their casualties less than one for every thousand Arabs killed.

Then the Mohad'gen arrived and the Americans trembled.

This new kind of terrorism no longer targeted the helpless and poor. Now the powerful and the proud were terrified. It was Allah's will, he told his men.

Tariq quickly adjusted to this reality, just like he'd always done. He'd dealt with his share of terrorists over the years, and like all such groups, this one could eventually be focused to his needs. He thought it was fitting that the less educated thought they really were gods. He of course believed only in the one god. Allah.

Then he met Arianne, who claimed to work for Mohad'gen. She'd asked for his help to gather intelligence on the American command structure. Tariq had many contacts, and he knew how to enlist the people who fed the workers on the American bases.

He'd also tested Arianne by giving her the names of three princes in neighboring Saudi Arabia who were secretly buying weapons on the black market. A week later all three were dead. Despite having the best armored cars and the best guards, they'd been brutally slaughtered in the middle of the night.

Still, he was suspicious. The Mohad'gen could be in the employ of the US. Maybe Special Forces, possibly even the CIA. They might be using him to find anyone who remained loyal to Saddam. He tested Arianna further by asking her to target an important American General who'd been vocal in his desire to continue the war in the Middle East. He'd been reassigned to the US Pentagon to shut him up, so the attack would have to take place in America. If this woman

had sympathies for the Americans, she'd find a way to fail at her mission.

To his surprise, she succeeded. The newspaper reported on the General's death. A footnote on page 57. Accordingly to the report, his car had fallen from an overpass and been crushed under the treads of a construction tractor in a very unusual traffic accident. Most importantly, he'd died on the exact day that Arianne had promised he would.

Still, whomever the Mohad'gen were or no matter how useful his alliance was with them, they were just another tool. He needed his enemies killed to make room for his new regime. And he needed money and modern weapons. US weapons. Soldiers he could always find. Many of his former troops despised the new Iraqi government. An American puppet.

He'd taken his first step by putting a vial of Anthrax on the market. It was one of a dozen such vials that he'd spirited out of Iraq just before the collapse of Baghdad. The Anthrax was a small start, but it would be worth millions in the right hands, and from such humble beginnings did great armies rise. He sipped his coffee and breathed the stuffy air as he dreamed a very Iraqi vision of grandeur.

He was startled from his dream by a knock on the door. Before he could answer, a very tall woman dressed in a black hajib stepped through the door.

Arianna.

He didn't stand up, partly because she was a woman and partly because he didn't want to reveal his lesser height. It was shameful to have to look up into a woman's eyes.

Arianne walked across the room, her body moving with a sensuous grace. Other than the dancers at Saddam's old palace, he'd not seen a woman who moved with such fluidness. "Do you have a new target for me?" she asked in heavily accented Arabic.

Tariq nodded as he motioned to the chair opposite him. "Mohammad Asam. He's an Iranian who runs a chemical weapons research facility in Iran. Here's the location." He slid a folded piece of paper across to her.

Arianne glanced at the paper, but didn't touch it. She looked down into his eyes. "This is the first time you have lied to me, Tariq. I happen to know that Mohammad Asam has been secretly studying ways to counteract the residual effects of the chemical weapons you Iraqis used on their people decades ago."

Tariq smiled, his eyes narrowing like a snake's. "You've been talking with the Americans. They've filled you with their lies."

"One man's lie is another man's truth. And one such truth is that a man in Amman has come into possession of a biological weapon. Anthrax. Do you know who that man might be?"

Tariq's darting eyes gave him away. He'd been unprepared for the question. "No one has such weapons here," he lied, quickly recovering his poise. "Don't you read the papers? The Americans

found nothing in Iraq because there was nothing to find. That was nearly two decades ago."

"Are you certain, Tariq? Your life depends on your answer."

He flipped the safety off the 9mm he held under the table. "Trust is such a precious thing, is it not, Arianne? So hard to separate from lies."

"You are very foolish, Tariq Nassir. I am not your plaything. So don't play games with me."

Tariq tightened his grip on his gun. He didn't like where this was going.

"And all this time, I thought you were on my side, Tariq."

"Your side?" he laughed nervously. "How can anyone be on your side? I don't even know who you serve. I know only that you have killed my enemies, and for that, I forgive you your insult. You can go. But do not return to Amman or I will kill you."

"It's not really that simple, now is it, Tariq," Arianne said smoothly, her accent softening. "But you have been useful up to now, so I will grant you one more wish. A last wish."

Tariq flipped off the safety of his Glock. The click was loud in the closed room. "And then you'll do what? Kill me?"

"Yes. I will."

Tariq gave her a feral grin. He'd been threatened before and he was still alive. The gun under the table had proven useful many



times. "No, I don't think it's going to work that way, Arianne. If you value your life, remove your hajib."

Arianne laughed. "That's not a very interesting last wish."

Tariq felt a cold chill tracing up his back. She didn't look nervous despite having a gun pointed at her belly. Like most terrorists, she was dangerous, evil, and unpredictable. Probably a little insane. But he was also dangerous. "If you leave now, I will grant you your life. But leave the hajib behind. I want to know whom I'm dealing with in case we cross paths again."

She laughed from beneath her coverings. "Then you Arabs shouldn't dress your women in such shrouds as these. You never know what we might be plotting from beneath them." Lifting her hands, she quickly unwrapped her robe and pulled her head covering off to reveal shockingly blonde hair. It was long enough to reach her waist.

Tariq stared at her as if he was seeing an apparition, unable to tear his eyes from hers. They were like blue pools, drawing him into their bottomless depths. As clear as a child's, they sparkled like faceted jewels. Yet instead of beauty, he saw his own death in them. "Allah protect me," he muttered, tightening his finger on the trigger.

"Actually, I don't do human mythology."

"Then your blasphemy will seal your fate. I curse your soul's extinction in the afterlife." He tightened his finger, and the heavy 9mm bucked in his hand.

Arianne staggered backward as the sharp blow slammed into her side, just over her liver. A sharp pain radiated through her body to open her eyes wide in surprise. She hadn't expected him to fire so quickly. She struggled to force a smile to her lips as she stepped closer to him, letting her robe fall to the floor. She wore a polished metallic outfit beneath. The metal foil was a bare millimeter thick, and it fit snugly over her chest. Her arms and shoulders were bare, as was her midriff. A leotard-style bottom made of the same tightly fitting metal foil completed the outfit.

Tariq didn't seem to notice the outfit. Instead, his eyes were staring disbelievingly at the lead smudge on her stomach.

"That is impossible... no one..." Tariq had never been at a loss of words before, but now he couldn't complete a sentence. He stared at her, trying to figure out the trick. Could she be wearing armor that looked like skin?

"The Americans were surprised as well," Arianne said as if reading his mind. "Although unlike your people, they are more accepting of the empowerment of women." She leaned across the narrow table, her eyes inches from his. Tariq's gun barrel was now pressed tightly against her abdomen.

"But the bullet... you should be dead," he said dumbly. His heart raced leaped as he felt her hand on his. He tried to pull the gun back, but she slowly pried his fingers from it, starting with his trigger finger.

He cursed and reached up to grab her hair with his free hand, jerking her forward. She leaned backward, lifting him bodily from his chair.

"I've reserved that honor for you, Tariq."

Tariq threw himself at her. He'd survived coups and assassination attempts and war. Surely he'd survive this woman. She stepped backward, off balance. He grabbed for her throat and he flattened her to the floor, slamming her head against the hard tiles. His hand flashed under his robe to return with the cruel knife of an assassin. He didn't understand the trick with the bullet, or her unusual strength in taking his gun away from him, but his knife would bring him the justice he deserved. He jammed the point against her bare skin, shoving it upward under her ribs with all his strength, morbid lust filling him as he sought to turn the sparkle of her blue eyes into the pallor of death.

Arianne's eyes instead sparkled even brighter as she took a quick breath. Tariq saw pain in them. He grabbed for his gun, and tried to fire it. But her legs closed around his arm with frightening strength. Horrible, crushing pain lanced up his arm. He tried to jerk his hand back, but could not.

She just stared into his eyes, a tiny smile tilting her lips. Her eyes were so bright, so eerily blue. So calm.

"Each death has a divine purpose, don't you think?" she asked softly, her voice almost sensual. "A blessed release from mortal pain." She tensed her legs further. Tariq screamed as he heard what

sounded like dry chicken bones snapping. Each snap sent a horrible wave of sharp pain exploding through his arm.

Arianne reached up to draw her fingernail back and forth across the top of the marble table, scribing it deeply. Then she smacked her fist on the tabletop to split it along the line. Tariq looked down in horror to see his arm looking like raw meat, the skin bursting, tendons and bones torn and shattered from the pressure of her legs.

"Allah have mercy..." he gasped as wave after wave of wave of horrible pain raced up his arm.

"I will show you exactly as much mercy as you showed your men. The ones you killed with your own hand for not wanting to fight the Americans. As much mercy as the Anthrax in your safe would show its victims."

"Who... what... are you?"

"My name is Ayla. What I am is more complicated to answer. You call us Mohan'gen, the ancient assassins. We have other names in other places. But that is no concern of yours. You have a higher calling at the moment."

She reached out to pinch off the nerve in his armpit to end his pain. Policy called for a quick and painless culling, but he was the worst of his cruel kind, and she wanted him conscious until the last moment. The religious men of Iraq who were so capable of killing. A paradox that she didn't understand.

She released his numbed arm to float from her chair. She sat down in his lap. Wrapping her bare legs around him.

Despite his injuries and the burning nerve pain from his numbed arm, Tariq was still enough of a man to marvel at the slender firmness of her body. Her flawless skin, girlishly smooth, and the complete lack of wrinkles was inhuman. There wasn't a hair on her body except for her head, not even the tiny hairs that everyone else had on their arms. He took an involuntary breath as she ran her fingers over his ribs, seeming searching for something. Her hand was warm, her skin soft, yet her fingers felt as stiff as steel rods. He inhaled her scent. It was an intoxicating mixture of musk and the sweetness of wildflowers after a rain. A strangely quieting peace came over him as he inhaled it. He found he was mentally alert yet relaxed, wildly aroused yet warmly mellow. Despite the burning numbness of his arm, he'd never felt better in his life.

He knew at that moment that she was truly one of Allah's angels. He stared calmly into her bottomless blue eyes, suddenly eager to go to his reward. No more struggle remained, no more hopes.

He felt a sudden crack and stab of pain as she pressed her thumb against his uppermost rib, shattering it. He cried out in pain only to have her hand cover his mouth. Unable to breathe now, his eyes grew large with pain. Yet the dying fantasy of one of Allah's faithful filled his thoughts, and his only regret was that he'd found such perfection only in his dying moments. A woman who was so

perfectly beautiful, and a warrior so perfectly lethal. He prayed that he'd have such a woman at his side when he met Allah. He didn't need forty black-eyed virgins, just one blue-eyed woman like this. With her at his side, he could change heaven itself.

His pain multiplied as she wrapped one arm around his chest to empty his lungs. Releasing his mouth now that he could no longer scream, she hugged him to her chest, pressing her breast against the rib she'd broken. He screamed silently as her crushing embrace pushed his broken rib into his left ventricle. The endomorphins that flooded his body allowed him to marvel that she was an assassin possessed of such perfect confidence, someone who found value, even artistry, in the way that she killed. If only he'd used her to kill more of the Americans.

Ayla bent his head back and stared into his brown eyes, fascinated with the Islamic faithful's calm acceptance of death. She embraced him tightly until his body became quiet, trying to sense the life force he so believed in as it departed. She felt nothing but his fibrillating heart. She saw nothing in his eyes except a fading light. Unlike the Americans who died fighting desperately to the last heartbeat, never giving up even after their struggle was clearly futile, the Muslim belief in the afterlife was so complete that they seemed to welcome their final release.

It was a faith she herself lacked.

To her people, death was merely the absence of life. An end of existence. In that way, they and many of the Americans were similar. The Shaadar mourned their fallen in the ways of warriors. They honored a fallen one's achievements, and mourned the loss of vital friendships suddenly ended. They cried for lost lovers. More practically, they regretted the loss of a valuable ally who might have helped them perform future deeds. But still, death was an end, not a beginning. The ceremonies were brief and simple.

She finally released him to let him slump to the blood-soaked floor. A rush of excitement bordering on arousal filled her body. It was a good kill. She felt her baby kick strongly again. Tariq's gunshots had awakened her. Either that or it was the hormonal quickening of her kill. Being pregnant for the first time, she was experiencing new emotions and sensations nearly every day.

A new thought crossed her mind: was it morally right to create life even as her profession was to end it? To involve her unborn child in such assassinations? She shook her head, combing her blonde hair out with her fingers. They were the kinds of questions that Tala would ask. Ones that were too complicated for a warrior, she quickly decided.

She rubbed a bloody hand across her chest as she felt the heat of her Aur'a'lenz fading. She wished her husband had come down on this mission with her. There were so many things they could have shared.

She pushed that wishful thought away like the others and kneeled down to roll the human up the Persian rug that covered the floor. Her mission had just begun. What was beneath the floor was the real threat.

They would serve as good practice for her sister.



## Chapter Fifteen

*Sunday, December 13, 2019, 1:15pm, Amman, Jordan*

Lana looked doubtfully up at her older sister. "It's locked."

"And you are Shaadar. I don't understand the problem."

Lana shrugged as she hooked her finger through the hasp of the heavy padlock. She grabbed the body of the lock and twisted her wrist. The hasp snapped it off.

"I can't believe they even called this a lock," she said as she tossed the ruined padlock to the side.

"Terrans are weak. That was a good lock by their standards."

Lana shrugged as he pulled the door up to descend into the darkness. Her feet barely touched the stairs as she descended to a dirt floor. She fumbled to find the light switch and was rewarded with a brilliant blaze.

Blinking through tearing eyes, she saw were four very frightened men lying chained on filthy mattresses along one side of the room. Three Arabs, probably Iraqi from their look, and a westerner. A six-foot tall safe was standing in the middle of the floor. It looked old and rusty.

"You need to practice your Aur'a, Lana dear," Ayla said from the stairs. "And when you open the safe, don't jiggle it around. I think there are vials of Anthrax inside. We don't want to contaminate the area."

Lana tried not to stare at her sister's bloody legs. "Open it here? In front of them?"

"Would you like me to kill them first?"

"No," Lana said quickly as a wave of nausea filled her. This was her first mission since her sister had brought her down to the planet, and the barbaric sight of spilled blood disgusted her. "Why don't you just go and, I don't know, get cleaned up or something."

"You have to develop a stomach for this, Lana. This is what we do. We bring peace by culling the violent. The good of the many outweighs the sacrifice of the few. It can't be done without spilling blood."

"You've been drumming those messages into my head for weeks," Lana whined. "I'm totally sick of it already."

"It is our work. You should take pride in it."

Lana glared at her sister. "It's not my work, Ayla. I'm an artist not a killer. You brought me down against my wishes."

"But now you are here. You are my sister. We are in the middle of battle. Killing is necessary. Nothing more needs to be said."

"How glorious the words of a peacemaker," Lana said sarcastically.

"Regardless of your other talents, your work here would be easier for you if you believed in it," Ayla said firmly, ignoring her sister's protests.

"I always think for myself, Ayla. Every situation has a morality. A right and a wrong."

"Not here. We have only the mission. A simple one."

Lana turned her back to her sister. She sighed as she looked at the huge safe. "And since when have the Shaadar ever done anything the easy way? Never any lasers, never any explosives."

"Because such weapons might hurt someone other than our target. You'll just have to use your Gemini creativity to figure out how to open it."

"With exactly what? My bare hands?"

"No, with your sweet disposition," Ayla smirked. "Or maybe with your finely developed sense of human compassion." She turned and floated back up the stairwell.

Lana turned to face the frightened men. "Ah, any chance you guys have the combination?"

The three Arabic men stared blankly at her. The western-looking man spoke.

"They don't exactly give the combination to people they are about to torture to death." He spoke in perfect English. It was the only Earth language Lana had learned. She walked closer to him.

"Finally, someone I can talk to."

"You're an American?" he asked.

Lana smirked. "Farther from it than you can possibly imagine. But my language teacher once lived in Los Angeles."

"Let me guess. Before he flew back up to the stars."

"More or less," Lana shrugged. "We all do our share of dirt time. And it was a she."

"Dirt time? Sounds so appealing. My name is Jack Higgins by the way."

Lana saw him smile at her. Unlike the terrified looks the other men were giving her, he seemed almost calm.

She glanced back at the safe. "Well, if you can't open it nicely for me, then I'll do it myself. Hope you guys don't mind, but I need some room to work." She undid the clasp of her robe, and unwrapped it, letting the rough cotton fall to the floor. She wore nothing beneath it.

The Iraqis averted their eyes, but Jack's opened wider, sparkling with amusement. "Now this I didn't expect to see in Tariq's dungeon. A naked blonde."

Lana tried to keep a serious look on her face. "I work best this way."

“And you work out a lot I see.”

Lana could hear his heart beating differently than the others. He wasn't as much frightened by her as interested. She closed her eyes and sniffed the air. Yes, she could even smell his musk. No time for that. She turned her back to him and tensed the special muscles deep in her chest. Her Aur'a'lenz awoke to send a burst of painful heat radiating through her chest. Turning to face him with her eyes closed, she clenched her teeth and stood on her toes to stretch, counting the seconds until the rush of pinpricks slowly spread outward to her arms and legs, fading into the sublimely tingling warmth of her Aur'a.

Her eyes were brighter when she opened them. "In case you haven't guessed, my sister and I are a bit stronger than we look. "

"You're... you're totally gorgeous," he said in amazement. He spoke with the soft lilt of a Californian.

Lana crossed her hands over her chest as his words sent an unwanted tickle of arousal through her body. She felt her nipples harden and her scalp tingle as her pheromic glands awakened. Her admirer was breathing faster now, inhaling her scent. His skin color darkened as his capillaries flushed with blood. She felt his own heat radiating.

"And to think I've always been considered plain back on Aurora." Her voice carried a hint of sarcasm. He was obviously no longer thinking for himself.

"A goddess," Jack said in awe. It took him a second to realize how corny that sounded.

Lana laughed. It was comical the way her Aur'al pheromones scrambled men's brains. At least this man was amusing to talk to. Not like that sweaty Italian in Milan.

"Lana, don't play around," Ayla called down the stairs. "Just get it done. We have to get moving."

Lana sighed. "My sister is such a pain. All she thinks about is the mission." She turned her back to walk over to the safe. "Speaking of which..."

The safe looked impossibly strong. Still, she knew something about opening them. She'd been taught to destroy the locking mechanism, usually by digging her fingernails under the combination dial to pry it off, then smashing her fingers into the shaft opening to wider it. Or by jamming her fingers into the cracks around the door until she could peel it open.

But none of those were going to work with something fragile inside.

This job called for pure strength. Brute strength. Yet she hardly felt like a brute. She was six feet tall and unusually slender, her fingers long and delicate looking. She'd been trained as a dancer, not a warrior. If she hadn't gotten into trouble with that Commander, she'd still be working in the entertainment center on the ship.

She pushed those thoughts away as she grabbed the closest hinge on the safe and tried to twist it off. It was good German steel and it didn't yield. She changed her grip and tried again. This time her Aur'a'lenz glowed brightly beneath her skin, sending out a powerful flush of energy through her bloodstream. She bit her lip and began to really work on the safe.

The thick hinge gave off a few pops and a soft groan. But it still didn't bend noticeably. Lana took a deep breath and tried again, gripping it so hard this time that her arms began to shake from the strain. She was rewarded with a horrible groan as the hardened steel gave a little more. She braced her other hand against the front of the safe as the more energy flowed onto her slender muscles. She tried again, and this time the hinge twisted and bent with a horrible scream to tear loose from the door. She was fully empowered now. She took advantage of the rush of strength to quickly twist the other hinges off the same way. She put her bare foot against the door and pulled hard on the thick handle. It promptly tore free of the door.

She cursed under her breath as she dropped the handle into the sand. The door obviously didn't depend on its hinges to secure it. It must use internal locking bars. Aur'a or no Aur'a, she definitely needed more muscle.

She walked over to call up the stairs. "Ayla, I need some help down here."

Ayla floated back down a few seconds later. Her skin was wet, but gratefully, clean. She glanced at the torn hinges and missing door handle. "Exactly what were you trying to do?"

"Like, you know, open it without shaking it too much? You said the contents were fragile."

"You're still not very strong, are you?"

"I'm a dancer, Ayla."

"So? And I'm pregnant. That's not slowing me down."

"It doesn't even show. You'll be spreading your happy mayhem until the moment you deliver."

Ayla stood in front of the safe as she stiffened her hand, forming her fingers into a blade shape. "You have to work on the frame, Lana." She wrapped her arm around the left side of the safe and pressed her fingernails against the crack between door and frame. "You work them in like this." Ayla's back and shoulder tensed with hard muscle as she pressed her fingertips against the steel. She bit her lip and strained. Ever so slowly, the steel began to bend. A minute later, her fingers were buried up to the first knuckle.

Ayla stepped back. "You try it."

"My arms are already sore," Lana complained.

"And you've never gotten sore while dancing?"

"I'm into the beauty of movement – not into grunting like some wrestler."



Ayla rolled her eyes. "Oh, spare me."

"Let me go home and I will."

"You're so proud of your legs. Show me what they can do."

Lana looked back at the safe. Why hadn't she thought of that. She hopped up to wrap her long legs around the safe. Squeezing her ankles against the sides hard enough to leave an imprint, she put her dancer's muscles to work. Seconds later, her Aur'a'lenz flared hot enough to make the outline of her sternum glow a cherry-red.

The safe didn't have a chance. Not against a dancer's legs. The steel groaned and then yielded in a musical litany of pops and snaps that soon turned into a horrible, tortured scream as she leaned back and struggled to close her legs. It took less than a minute to bend the huge safe into a figure eight shape.

Lana dropped back to the floor and slipped her fingers through the gap around the door and pulled hard. Then again. The thick steel barely bent.

Ayla sighed in frustration. "For a moment, I thought you were going to impress me."

Lana glared at her. "I don't have the upper body you have. You do it."

"Personally, I'd be embarrassed if I were you. Needing a pregnant woman to help you with the simplest tasks?"

"A pregnant warrior."

Ayla put her hands next to Lana's and pulled, her upper body tensing with hard-edge muscle. It wasn't as easy as she'd claimed, but she wasn't going to tell Lana that. Her skin was slick with sweat by the time she was able to reach past the bent door and pull back a half dozen small bottles of white powder. She handed one to Lana who read the labels. Her English was better.

"This is it, Ayla. So how do we get rid of it all?"

Ayla took one vial from her and unscrewed the stopper to break the bioseal. "Easy, we swallow it. Can't hurt us and our bodies will digest it."

"Ugh. You do it. Everything tastes terrible on Earth."

Ayla sighed as she put the first vial to her lips. Lana was always trying to get out of one thing or another. She tossed her head back and let the bitter-tasting spores fill her mouth. She struggled to swallow it, but the dry powder stuck in her throat. She handed a second bottle to Lana. "I'm going to need some help here, Lana."

Lana made a face as she gagged on the bitter powder. "Where's a Pepsi when we really need it," she quipped as she licked her dry lips. "So what about them?" Lana motioned to the frightened men.

"What do you think? Tariq was going to kill them anyway."

Ayla walked over to kneel beside the first of the men. His eyes looked like those of a frightened animal as he tried not to look at her nudity. Her voice was surprisingly soft when she spoke. "This won't

really hurt." She cupped the back of his head with her left hand, bending his head backward slightly.

The man struggled to push her hands away, his eyes darting around in panic as he searched for something to fight back with. He finally lifted his arms and wrapped the chain around Ayla's neck, pulling it tight with all his strength.

Ayla calmly reached up to grasp the steel cuffs on his wrists, and pulled his arms further apart. The chain tightened further around her neck until the links snapped from the strain. Unfortunately, so did the man's wrists. He made his first sound now. A gasp of pain. She quickly put him out of misery by grabbing his head to twist it half way around. His neck gave off a wet snap and he fell limply to the dirt floor.

The other men tried to run for it, but their chains hobbled them. Ayla grabbed their wrists and swung them back in front of her, their feet dangling in mid-air. She pulled them close enough to wrap her arms around their necks, and then flipped herself backward into an aerial somersault, effectively wringing their necks while she was still in mid-air. She dropped their bodies casually to the floor and brushed off her hands. She turned to look at Jack, her hands on her hips. Her warm smile was horribly misplaced.

Jack stared back at her provocative pose in horror. This was a woman who liked to kill. He crawled deeper into his corner, horrified by the blonde's casual cruelty. "I'm an American," he called out

urgently. "We're fighting on the same side. Looking for WMD's. I was on the track of that Anthrax. You must have intercepted my reports."

"Who says we're on anyone's side?" Ayla said with a toss of her hair. She rose to spin around on her heel. "The talkative one is all yours, Lana. You know what to do."

Lana closed her eyes as her stomach heaved again. She'd never killed anyone.

"I'll meet you upstairs." Ayla disappeared up the steps.

Jack just stared at Lana. Fascinated and disgusted. The other woman hadn't just killed his Iraqi associates. She'd culled them. Like a vet with a sick animal. "Who the fuck are you people?" he asked angrily. "And why are you here?"

Lana walked over to stand in front of him, her nudity forgotten. Why indeed, she asked herself. This wasn't her gig. She shrugged and tried to explain it simply. "We're Shaadar. We were sent here to eliminate aggression on your world. To destroy those humans who destroy other humans."

Jack stared up at her. Despite the horror, he decided she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Perfect skin, childlike eyes, blonde hair, and wickedly fit. He glanced back at the mangled safe. More than just fit. "You make it sound like you aren't."

She raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Aren't human?" He repeated.

"Oh. You ever see a human open a safe that way?"

"You're Omegan," he said with a soft whistle.

"Whatever that is," Lana shrugged. "We call ourselves the Shaadar."

"Angels some say."

"Well, kind of, I guess," Lana frowned, not wanting to think about what she was supposed to do. She was surprised to find herself enjoying talking to someone other than her sister. She settled down to sit on the dirt floor next to him. "My ancestors got written up in your mythology when we visited Earth a long time ago. The Christians called us angels, although other people had different names. Goddess. Sorceress. Devil."

"My vote goes for the first. Angels are known for their compassion."

Lana knew she shouldn't be talking about this, but Ayla never listened to a thing she said. She was always so serious, talking about the mission, especially since she'd gotten pregnant.

"So, you're really going to kill me?" Jack asked, his voice rising slightly in pitch. "After being captured and tortured by that asshole Tariq, after leading you right to the Anthrax, you're going to put me down like some kind of sick animal? What kind of angel does that?"

"An angel of death?" Lana said hopefully.

"That's total bullshit. More like some kind of heartless assassin."

Lana bristled. "I'm not an assassin."

"Prove it."

Lana smiled as she felt him working on both her emotions and on her pride. "Clever man. But I'm afraid I can't leave any loose ends. Policy."

"Policy? What the hell kind of policy is that? Killing to silence witnesses? Like some Nazi?"

"No. Killing to prevent more killing. There's a long tradition of that among most sentient beings. We just do it more selectively than you do. No bombs. Or biologicals or gas. Just some careful culling of the violent ones." She hated the sound of her words. They were all rationalizations. The same ones Ayla had been echoing over and over to her.

"I'm trying to stop the killing too," he said quickly, his breath coming in shudders now. He felt so weird all of a sudden. Light headed. Turned on? He found himself staring at her breasts. They were perfect.

Lana rose to her knees, resting her arms gently on his shoulders. Her bright eyes were inches in front of his. So large. He felt like he was looking into two sunlit windows. Windows into another world.

The warmth and sweet scent of her body washed over him, bringing with it a nearly irresistible desire to touch her. He restrained an impulse to hug her, and instead reached up with his chained wrists to hold her arms. They felt like steel bars. About what he'd expected

given what she'd done to the safe. Her skin felt so soft. He forced himself to release her.

Conflicting emotions chased each other across his thoughts. On one hand, he was wildly turned on. On the other, he wanted to run for his life. One thing for sure, he wasn't going to overpower her. His only hope was to appeal to her emotions. He forced a smile to his lips. "Look, I've been risking my life searching for these weapons for months now, destroying them whenever I find them. Stopping violence from starting. Just like you and your friend."

"She's my sister. And it's nice to have a skill. But you're still in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"My cover was blown. Tariq is smarter than I gave him credit for."

"Was. Ayla already killed him."

"Well, that's one less scumbag to worry about." He looked deeply into her blue eyes. They had a warmth about them. "Look, I can help you find the others. My name is Jack Higgins. I'm with the CIA."

"I don't think we need any help, Jack Higgins."

"And exactly how did you find Tariq?"

Lana shrugged. "My sister did. This isn't really my game."

"But it is mine. You need me."

"You want to try to explain that to Ayla?"

Jack shuddered as he remembered the way her sister had killed the men. He shook his head.

"Don't be afraid, Jack Higgins. I'm very good at this. It's completely painless. The brain stem is instantly separated and..."

"And I don't want to know," Jack interrupted, almost shouting. He tried not to panic as she started to hold him tighter. He took a deep breath, and felt a wave of strangely compelling warmth washing over him. He gasped for breath, astounded to find that he was aroused. He smiled at the ridiculousness of that. It was so absurd. "These fucking Arab's go to heaven dreaming of their virgins. And I go all turned on and randy?"

Lana giggled as she looked down at him. He was. He was also cute. "You Americans are different, I'll give you that. But then, we do have a few special talents. They're called pheromones."

Jack's skin tingled from the most powerful rush of desire he'd ever felt. He knew he was fighting for his life, but he couldn't help but lean forward to kiss her on her Anthrax-coated lips.

Lana froze as his warm kiss traced across her lips. She hadn't been kissed in a long time. It felt very good. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. A long, deep, passionate, breathless kiss.

"Well, that's one way to do yourself in," she said when the kiss ended. She licked her Anthrax coated lips. "A lot slower though."

"Please. I really can help you."



Her arms softened marginally as her lips found his again. She kissed him this time. A very warm, human kiss. Yet her sister had killed those other men with no more remorse than a rancher putting down a sick horse. He didn't want to die that way. "Look," he pleaded again as her goodbye kiss ended. "I don't know what's in the afterlife. But maybe, just maybe, I'll carry the memory of this kiss with me forever. The kiss of an angel."

Lana smiled brighter as her heart grew warm. She reached behind her head to grab the middle of his chains. Her body tensed, and hard muscles flexing larger than should have been possible given her slender build flexed. The chains snapped apart with a loud PING. She guided his hands to her back and kissed him again. He reached up to hold her hands, noticing that she wore a golden ring shaped like two intersecting ellipses. This time her breath was sweet with the scent of hormones and desire.

"Lana, would you just get it over with," Ayla called impatiently from the top of the stairs. "We're due in Athens in a few hours."

Lana reluctantly ended her kiss. She floated back to her feet to hover just off the floor, lifting Jack to his feet. "Where are you from, Jack?"

"Ventura."

"I don't know where..."

"It's in the United States. California," he added unnecessarily. "I'm CIA. Look, we could work together. I can help you find the weapons and the bad guys. You can then do... whatever you do."

Lana looked at him for a long moment, surprised to find that she was holding him gently, rubbing his back. He trembled in her hands. More from desire than from fear, she proudly realized. She traced her lips across his cheek to whisper in his ear. "Well, Jack Higgins of the CIA, I'll tell you what. If you're still alive and kicking next month, put a Personals add in the LA Times with your phone number. Label it, *To Lana of Aurora.*"

He started to speak, but she touched her finger to his lips to silence him. She knelt back down to effortlessly snap the chains around his ankles. Then, without another word, she turned and floated magically up the stairs and was gone.

"Damn it, Lana," Ayla said as her sister rejoined her. "You don't have to play with the humans. It only makes it worse for them when you delay the inevitable."

Lana shrugged as she pulled on her robes. "He was nice, Ayla, and he was working on the same thing as we are. Too bad I didn't meet him in a bar or something first. We might have become friends."

Ayla looked worriedly at her sister. "He was just another government agent, Lana. A field operative. They're on our hit list now. Besides, he was just a Normal."

Lana wasn't listening to her sister as she peeked out into the alleyway. She watched an elderly man walk slowly around the distant corner. It was clear. She slipped out the door to stand in the shadows. Ayla followed her. Together they managed to flag down a decrepit old taxi and negotiate a ride to the airport.

They were going to fly in comfort today.

## Chapter Sixteen

*Sunday, December 13, 2019, 2:30pm, Amman, Jordan*

Jack Higgins staggered down the same alley, half blinded from the bright daylight. He flagged down the first taxi that passed him. He was in his room in the Empire Hotel fifteen minutes later. He rinsed his mouth out as best he could and then swallowed a full gram of Cipro, the antibiotic that was most effective against Anthrax. He knew that inhalation of Anthrax spores was fatal in ninety-percent of cases. His only comfort came from taking such a heavy dose of antibiotic so quickly after exposure. He prayed that would make a difference.

He made a call to the airline, and then packed his bags and headed for the airport. He needed the best medical care possible, and that meant using the next twelve hours to get back to the United States. He was lucky to have gotten the last seat on an Air France flight to Athens. First Class. He worked his way through the crowded airport and into the plane. He slumped into his seat and wrapped a blanket around himself. His lungs were already starting to get congested. Not a good sign.

He knew he was lucky to be alive as it was. He'd been on the run since he staggered out of that filthy basement, too busy to think, but now the vivid memories crashed back in on him. Astoundingly, he'd met an Omegan and he'd survived. He shouldn't have, no one else had ever seen one and lived to tell of it, they'd gone the way of his

Iraqi friends. But the girl had been young and inexperienced. He'd convinced her to go against her training, something that denoted a poor agent. He smiled at that strange thought. He definitely wasn't going to complain. At least he was alive.

He coughed, and felt the first of the chills coming on. Maybe not for long. It might have been kinder to have died like the Iraqi's. Painlessly and instantly.

He thought back to the girl's sister. What had she called her? Ayla. Another chill ran up his back, and not from the gathering illness. She killed without remorse, without pity. Like she was doing her victims a favor.

What was the name Lana called herself? Shaadar. He'd never heard that name before. Whatever they called themselves, they were the perfect assassins. It started with their physical appearance, so distracting, and then those pheromones or whatever. They reached into a man's libido to drug him with desire. They made a man want to be close, even if that meant his death. How could a man fight that? And then that incredible strength. Opening the safe that way. With her legs. That wasn't human.

He'd read the Intel briefings back in Washington. Lots of wild theories, but no facts. Some analysts thought the Omegans were artificial life forms that mimicked humans, androids perhaps. Mechanical constructs for sure. Probably made of metal, sort of like those Terminators in the movies. He touched his lips, remembering

the girl's kiss. They were wrong. Hers had been a very human, passionate kiss. Even her name was human: Lana. And then there was the way she'd looked at him. Warmly. Most of all, he remembered the human compassion she'd shown in the end.

No, they certainly weren't robots. Definitely not androids. Cyborgs maybe. But human mostly.

When the plane leveled off, he rose from his seat to go forward toward the lavatories. His thoughts were still racing so fast that he barely noticed the two blondes sitting in the front-most seats of the upper deck. Beautiful hair, at least from the back. One was sleeping, the other reading a magazine. He was about to pass by them when the girl in the aisle seat lifted her hand to brush a lock of hair away. She wore an elaborate golden ring shaped like two intersecting ellipses.

He froze one row behind them. He knew that ring. Impossibly, the Omegans were right here, on this flight!

His training took over. Turning silently, he made his way aft, glancing back at the women when he reached the curtain into Business Class. She was still reading her magazine.

His heart was pounding as he closed the lavatory door. He stared at his wide-eyed reflection in the mirror, and saw the growing pallor. The sheen of sweat on his face. Whether from fear or the growing fever, he had no idea. All he knew was that he couldn't let the Omegans spot him on the plane. Ayla would certainly finish the

job even if Lana didn't. Would they go as far as to down the plane? Killing everyone? He'd seen them float up and down the stairs of the basement. They could fly under their own power.

He waited as long as he could in the lavatory. More than an hour. He was really getting hot now, his ears flushing. It didn't look good. The spores must have been very potent. The plane began to descend and the seatbelt sign came on. He had to return to his seat. He wiped his face a final time and opened the door to step out. He was halfway back to his seat Lana reached down to unbuckle her seat belt. He was still two rows from his own seat when she started to rise, unfolding her long legs to stand so tall. He prayed she'd go forward to the front lavatory. She turned instead, her blue eyes rising to meet his.

They both froze, staring at each other.

He quickly ducked into his seat, slumping behind the back of the seat in front.

Had she recognized him?

He held his breath, staring at the aisle as he saw her bare legs appear. She passed by him. He started to exhale, only to see her step back. She lithely slid into the seat beside him.

"Well, hello again, Jack Higgins. You aren't following us are you?"

He turned his head as if in slow-motion, looking up into those same blue eyes. The light was so much here than in that dungeon.

She had a golden tan, with pale golden hair framing those incredible eyes. She had the most beautiful face he'd ever seen. He just stared.

She leaned closer when he didn't reply. "How'd you know what flight we were on?"

"I don't know anything," he coughed. "Just dumb luck. Or bad luck."

"You're already sick. Lungs filling?"

Jack nodded.

She looked sad. "You won't survive, Jack. And you can't talk to anyone. Surely you know that. I can't let you off this plane."

"But you said... the Personals column?"

"A moment of weakness. A mistake. If my sister sees you, she might take down the entire plane, just to make sure nobody else knows about us."

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"Just policy, right?" Jack said sarcastically. "You seem awfully sanguine about killing."

"I hate it. Which is why you're alive."

"I'm dying slowly. Thanks to your kiss."

"That wasn't why I kissed you."

"Then... why?"

Lana shrugged girlishly. "I guess because you were cute."

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A different kind of flush raced through Jack's body. He had to struggle to bring his thoughts back to the plane. To the others.

"No one else knows."

"But you want to protect them. Right?"

"So do you, Lana. So you won't tell your sister I'm here."

Lana slumped in her seat. "You presume too much."

"Perhaps. But you aren't some cold-blooded killer like her. You have a heart."

"Those dead Iraqi's might not agree. I didn't stop her."

"So your plan is to sacrifice the few for the good of the many. Is that how the deal works?"

Lana reached into her purse to hand him a small packet. "I don't want to talk about it here. Here, take this. If it works, we'll talk later. The personals column." She stood up to walk back to her seat.

Jack leaned his head into the aisle far enough to see her talking to her sister as she sat back down. Ayla laughed, but didn't look back. Jack ducked behind the seat to study the packet. The writing wasn't in English. In fact, the letters didn't look like any language he'd seen. Angles and geometric shapes. His heart leaped. It was alien. But was this a cure? Or a more lethal poison? It should be analyzed in the labs back in the US. Perhaps it was some wonder drug.

He coughed again, this time finding a trace of blood on the back of his hand. No, he wasn't going to make it that far. He quickly tore

open the plastic envelope and looked at the pill inside. It was purplish with strange runes on the side. He wished he could at least photograph it.

He studied the purple pill for a long moment before deciding that it didn't matter. If he didn't take it, he'd die. If he did, he'd either live or die. He boldly placed the pill on his tongue and washed it down with the last of his water. Then he tore the packet up into tiny pieces and dumped them into his water glass. They'd go down the drain in the kitchen.

The attendant cleared his drink away just before the wheels came down. Jack leaned back in his seat as the plane slowed for landing, his thoughts racing at the wonder of it all. He was already feeling better. After nearly dying at Tariq's hand, then facing down the Shaadar, he'd cheated death two more times. And in so doing, he'd made a friend of sorts with this cybernetic girl.

It suddenly occurred to him that he might possibly know more about the Omegans than anyone else on Earth. He also knew how to find them again. The ad in the Times. If he got back to Langley, he'd be able to change history.

Assuming he told anyone. She'd kept her part of the secret. But could he? The stakes were huge.

He suddenly felt sleepy, unable to keep his eyes open. The alien drug was working, doing whatever. Killing him. Healing him.

Somehow, it no longer mattered. He slumped in his seat just as the wheels touched down.

His eyes closed as his world turned black.

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