



CONQUERS
the
UNIVERSE

by Romana



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FORWARD PLANET VULCRA



As soon Vulcra's star rose, the revealed Boeing 757 looked out of place. It rested on scaffolding, 400 meters from the huge ring of a matter bridge. The matter bridge was still powering down; it looked very much like a colorful spinning dynamo. The ring was not actually spinning; it was an optical illusion generated by its inter-dimensional interface. A force field kept it in constant alignment with the unseen Earth, clear on the other side of the galaxy.

Waves of black, wedge-shaped strato-cruisers patrolled the skies, high above the airfield and high above a flock of circling *Skawn*. Except for constant swishing sounds, the strato-cruisers were fairly silent. It all served to accentuate the incongruity of the presence of the jetliner.



Momentarily the strato-cruisers parted to create a gap, while a golden dreadnought dropped down from a higher altitude. The dreadnought hovered briefly above a nearby airfield in the older part of Karie. It was a Lazarrian royal flagship, streamlined, with the classical design: two sets of impellor tubes fore and aft completely girdled the hull. When the spaceship landed, the gravitonic impellor tubes made the characteristic popping and spitting, as air reentered the tubes. The ship had forced its way amongst a herd of the camel-like *Barkgas*, whose job was to clear the airfield vegetation. Miraculously, none of the creatures was injured or maimed. Two royal passengers hurried left the ship and headed for the nearby citadel.

The flags atop the pointed spires of the central citadel of Karie seemed to flicker in the dawn light. Karie was the city of fire, constructed of typical geometric overlays, all colored shades of red. Slender clouds darted across the sky so fast that they seemed to throw the entire city out of balance.



On the ramparts, stood a ruddy-colored synthoid, a four-meter-high mechanical guard. It carried two deadly swivel-mounted disrupters, one on each shoulder. It looked somewhat like an impressionist's version of a mechanical woman, as it patrolled a path through the outer-perimeter parapets. It momentarily paused and moved aside as two women walked toward a secluded, enclosed courtyard. Body features, such as their reddish skin and hair, their thin noses, and their brown eyes with slightly vertical pupils revealed them to be Lazarrians. The shorter woman wore a regal blue gown, coordinated with laced flat-heeled, blue sandals and a dark blue cape. Atop her head, she wore a red

jeweled crown. A large crimson jewel rested just below the outline of her breasts, supported by a heavy gold necklace.

The other woman, who was clearly in charge, was dressed ominously in black: a black short-sleeved top and a black knee-length skirt, with a black cape and high top black boots. She also wore heavy red armbands and bracelets, and a wide red belt, to which was attached a sinister black-handled dagger in its black sheath. When she stepped, waves of the spider-like *Paertits* fled before her feet; they did not like her. The pests were also colloquially called *squeakers*, because of the loud, annoying sounds they made.

Streaks of white in her heavy eyebrows and long, windblown hair completed her unsettling appearance; then a black-furred *Skawn*, the emblem flyer of the Lazarrians, landed on her shoulder. It made a characteristic rumbling growl, as it flashed its small, silvery, razor-sharp teeth. It wanted some of the tasty *squeakers*.

"The days of recuperation are over," she began in a deep voice, as she stroked the *Skawn's* head, and took a sip of narcotic Tavik, from a flask, "and now begins my rise back to power. You have successfully restored my matter bridge, my sister."

"And you stole the sapphires for me, my sister-brother!" the woman in blue added. "I have adapted them and practiced with them; it is time to use them! Too bad we do not also have the black sapphire that the Teeli *acquired*." Zolanda was referring to the set of two sapphires that Kragg had stolen from the Quemgi. While the power sapphires had been found in a space relic centuries ago, but they had been unavailable, since the Quemgi had jealously guarded them in their city in the sky.

"Our first catch has been made!" cried Kragg as she raised her four-fingered hands to the sky. "Soon he will come: the Earther Lawrence Cooper, with his associate Dr. Zelenka. The years of disrupter-burn pain shall be

avenged! Once I have eliminated those annoying aliens, I will return to Taegella, where I shall crush the alliance of Prince Aahn and regain my empire!"

'I am the Chosen One,' thought Kragg. *'It was a mistake to trust the Earthers; they have no relation to the Legendary Ones with the Pointed Ears. My empire will rise again, and they shall all suffer!'*

"Our captives have arrived," announced Zolanda, interrupting Kragg's train of thought.

Next, priests of the *Odak* arrived to give their blessing. Actually, they were flaunting their political power, so Kragg did not like them. She spent much time contemplating how to eliminate her rivals with as little fuss as possible.

Their attention turned to the courtyard beneath them. It was covered by irregular stones. To the left was an old obelisk of some kind, but it was too rotted and decayed for anyone to discern its history, especially when it was covered with *squeakers*. *Skawn* circled overhead, waiting for a chance to eat.

Two members of Zolanda's high guard, the *Zarg*, attired in rust-colored uniforms and narrow black helmets with a front to back ripple on top, entered the courtyard first. They were followed by disrupter-armed, hulking dog-headed members of Zolanda's lower guard, dressed in black, the *Bozarg*, the first success of her powers of transformation, upon members of her regular guard, the *Zarg*. All their uniforms bore the same emblem: a black claw holding a white lightning bolt, which overlaid a red circle. They led a group of captive humans, the bewildered passengers and crew of the commercial jetliner.

One of the *Bozarg* did not like having *squeakers* underfoot and killed many with disrupter blasts.

Zolanda adjusted the universal translator that was pinned to high up on her left sleeve; then she spoke, "Welcome to Vulcra! I am Zolanda, sovereign queen. This is my sister, Empress Kragg, ruler of the universe. You are privileged to be part of a test of my expanded powers!" she exclaimed with intentional hyperbole.

She placed her right hand on the sapphire as she raised her left hand, the long finger of which carried the companion sapphire ring. The *Bozarg* separated the human men and boys from the human women and girls; then they herded the two groups to the edge of the courtyard, below the parapet. Diffuse streaks of orange dawn light ominously illuminated people's heads and shoulders.

Zolanda pointed her ring finger and recited a mantra. The sapphire in the ring radiated an almost-blinding white light, as if it were intensely hot. The human men and boys fell to the stone pavement, writhing in pain. Some of the human women screamed and tried to reach them, but the *Bozarg* kept them away. A white crust covered the men, who now lay quivering in place. Next, panic spread through the women and girls when they realized it was their turn, as Zolanda pointed at them and recited another mantra.

Within minutes, the crust covering the humans dried and blew away in the wind, exposing a startling transformation, which became evident as everyone gradually arose to stand again. All the human men and boys, as well as the women and girls, had been changed to resemble adult Vulcran women, varying little from each other in size and appearance. Everyone had also lost one digit from each hand and foot.

"My powers of transformation have indeed become wondrous!" exclaimed Zolanda with a sinister glee.

A woman ran to the person who was wearing her husband's clothes. Upon verification that he was no longer a man, and seeing that they both looked less than human, she broke into sobbing and tears.

"What have you...done to us?" asked the jetliner captain, who was still trying to get used to her new physiology and voice.

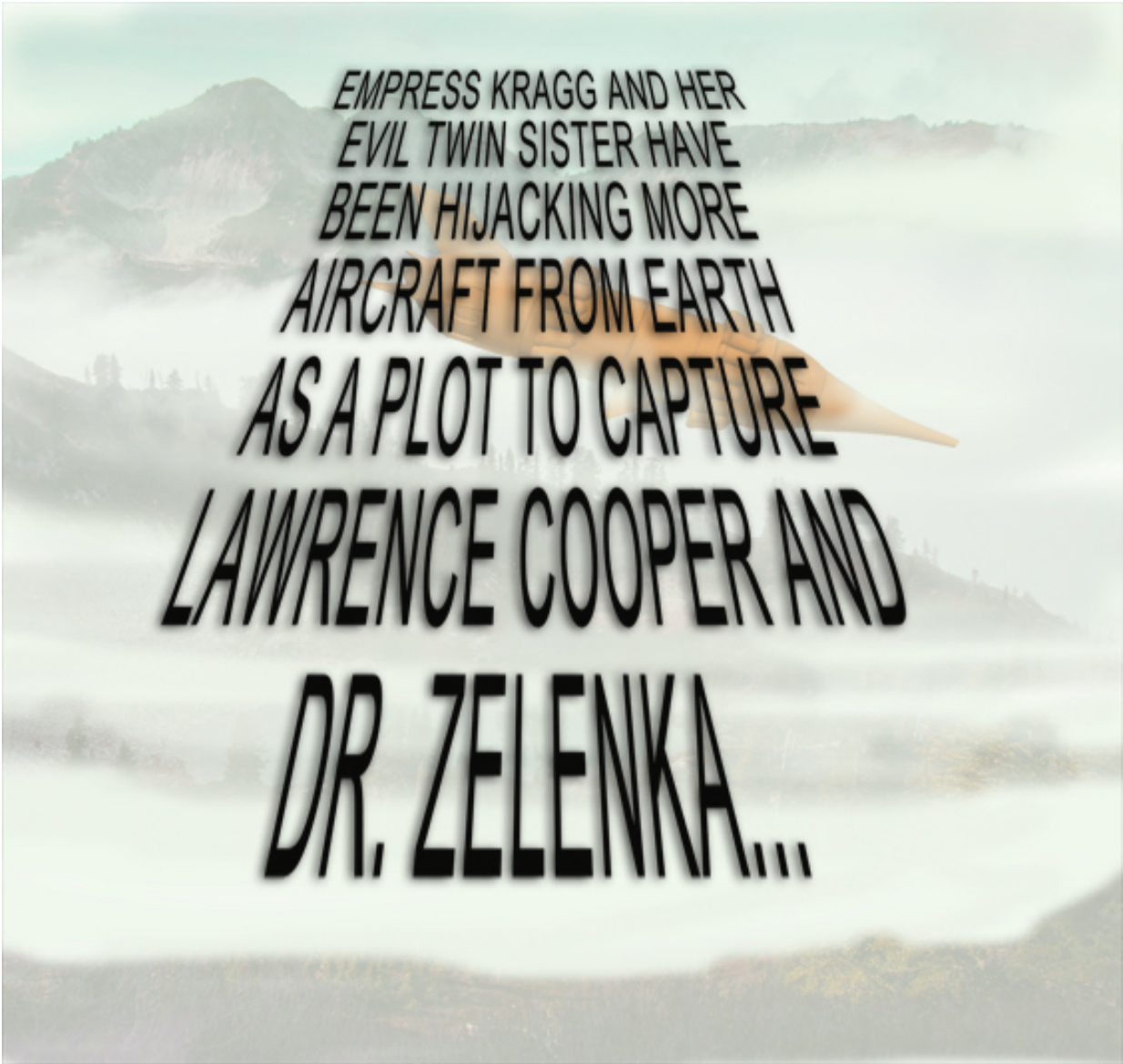
"Your previous lives are over," explained Zolanda. "You who are right-handed will serve my *Zarg* guard as pleasure maids until you die! You, who are left-handed, will be sent to work as attendants in the asteroid mines!"

"Preposterous!" replied the captain, as she and the others nervously watched more of the *Zarg* guards arrive carrying large yellow rings.

The rings were mind-control headbands. One by one, each of the humans had one placed on her head. As the units were switched on, the wearer's eyes blanked to an obedient stare. Once every transformed human had been placed under the power of a headband, Vulcran women clad in green were sent in to strip them bare, to re-outfit them. Soon, all the humans were dressed alike, as women in yellow minidresses and yellow flat-heeled sandals.

"The supply of these humans is endless," rejoiced Kragg. "Soon, we shall be able to send an armada through the matter bridge and subjugate them on their world as well. A prolific, mostly right-handed species such as this can be useful, so long as they wear the control headbands!"

"I look forward to transforming many future captives. I can even spare a couple of these women for your *special* embrace," smiled Zolanda.



*EMPRESS KRAGG AND HER
EVIL TWIN SISTER HAVE
BEEN HIJACKING MORE
AIRCRAFT FROM EARTH
AS A PLOT TO CAPTURE
LAWRENCE COOPER AND
DR. ZELENKA...*



ONE MORE AIRCRAFT VANISH

A crowd of reporters was held back by security, as government officials entered the closed door hearing. Everyone's identification was rigorously checked before they were allowed to proceed. Two reporters, Bill Taggert and Catherine Wright, compared notes while they strained to get as closely as possible to within hearing distance of the events inside the entrance door.



"Five airliners and almost two thousand people vanished into thin air: it could be the story of the century, but they tell us nothing," complained Bill.

"Now where have I seen that man before?" asked Catherine, as she watched an older, moderately tall, gaunt man with a well-trimmed beard approach. He was carrying a case in his left hand, from which he pulled a laptop computer. A technician immediately helped him plug into the overhead projector system.

"That's Dr. Frank Zelenka, a noted and somewhat eccentric scientist. "From his appearance, he hasn't taken good care of himself.."

"I remember," added Catherine, "reading about him. He's somewhat of a crackpot, isn't he?"

Bill nodded, as he spied someone interesting, a woman, a short-haired brunette, wearing a brown suit with a calf-length skirt and coordinated purse and shoes. "I wonder who *she* is?"

"Watch it Bill; you're drooling. She's Valerie Rogers, a roving government troubleshooter. She's sharp and she is tough, very tough. She's also a lesbian, so you probably would not be interested in her!"

* * *

FAA Denver director Russell Gordon opened the meeting and quickly went through the obligatory introductions; while Dr. Zelenka booted and adjusted his laptop. "And so, I now turn this session over to Dr. Zelenka," said Director Gordon. Some officials in the background murmured disapproval.

"I brought my computer," began Dr. Zelenka in his characteristic Eastern European accent, "because I have several programs to analyze this situation, which I have encountered before. Director Gordon, when I am ready, it would be helpful if someone would supply the coordinates, time, and date of each airliner at the moment they vanished off the air traffic control system.

The program prompted on the screen for the values, which Dr. Zelenka entered as they were recited to him. Once he had typed in the data for all five missing aircraft, Dr. Zelenka instructed the program to process the information.

"It appears that," explained Dr. Zelenka as he verified some values on his hand calculator, "that the first two airliners vanished 72.2 hours apart. After a lapse of 144.5 hours, the next two also vanished 72.2 hours apart. After a lapse of another 144.3 hours, the fifth airliner vanished yesterday. Now I will cross-reference with stellar formations at zenith."

A nighttime sky image appeared on the screen. A flashing circle marked the overhead position of the first airliner. As each of the other four airliners had its position noted, the circle got brighter, but its position did not change much.

"It is as I feared," sighed Dr. Zelenka. "Taegella! The problem originates at that position on the other side of the galaxy! It is a generated phenomenon called a matter bridge."

"Do we have to listen to this nonsense?" complained another FAA official. "This man's theories of alien civilizations have all been discredited!" Several other people in the room echoed his displeasure.

"Because of national security, I cannot explain how I know these things," began Dr. Zelenka, "but, in all sincerity, I wish it were not true! The predicted next occurrence is now displayed on the screen. Director Gordon, will there be an airliner in the vicinity within a plus or minus fifteen minute interval?"

Director Gordon whispered to an associate, who picked up a phone and placed a call. "We're checking now," he explained. Moments later, the associate gave him a written reply. "It seems that the region has a lot of air traffic. Aero Caribbean flight 1244, from Jacksonville to Caracas, will be practically dead on target, excusing the pun."

"Give the plane a military escort," suggested another man; "they will surely be able to establish what is happening!"

"Too dangerous!" countered Dr. Zelenka. "I have a, er...a special experimental aircraft that will work much better. I will need the help of my former associate, Lawrence Cooper, who is co-owner of *Merriam-Cooper Flyways*. He is fully cleared. He should be instructed to meet me at Bunker-29."

Background discussions indicated a high level of resistance to the suggestion, but Director Gordon granted the permission anyway, "I have no choice; the Pentagon says I am to give him full cooperation. However, our representative, Miss Rogers, will accompany Dr. Zelenka."

"I implore you," said Dr. Zelenka worriedly, "not to send this young woman into danger with us!"

"The decision is not open to debate!" said Director Gordon emphatically. As the room emptied, he hustled Dr. Zelenka and Valerie Rogers into a corner and formally introduced them.

"Miss Rogers, this is Dr. Frank Zelenka. Dr. Zelenka, this is special agent Valerie Rogers."

"Just call me Val," she began candidly. "I may not always be the easiest person to work with, but you can trust me!"

"For both our sakes, I really hope so," began Dr. Zelenka with an air of cynicism. "And, most people just call me Frank, or sometimes *Doc*."

* * *

"Marge, this is Val," began Valerie Rogers as she called her office in Washington D.C., "I need some information on a couple of gentlemen. Yes, Dr. Frank Zelenka, a controversial scientist, and Lawrence Cooper, some kind of aviator."

***TOO MANY AIRCRAFT
HAVE VANISHED. DR.
ZELENKA, ALONG WITH
A NEW ASSOCIATE,
VALERIE ROGERS, HEAD
FOR CREECH AIRFORCE
BASE IN NEVADA, WHERE
THEY EXPECT TO MEET
UP WITH LAWRENCE
COOPER AT BUNKER-29.....***





TWO NEVADA

Sunset was three hours away as the small shuttle plane, transporting Dr. Zelenka and Valerie Rogers from Las Vegas, set down at the desert runway of Creech AFB, near Indian Springs, Nevada. As the plane taxied toward the terminal compound, Dr. Zelenka pointed to a fancy converted military fighter jet that was parked at the edge of the field. On its side was the insignia *Merriam-Cooper Flyways* in gold text, punctuated by silver and gold stars.

Dr. Zelenka and Val scarcely paused as they transferred their baggage from the plane to the back of a light-green Hummer H2 SUT. Dr. Zelenka was dressed black, including heavy duty black boots. Val wore a loose-fitting tan jump suit and medium-duty, low-heeled brown boots. They hardly spoke to each other, and Val was preoccupied with the odd tattoo she had noticed in the palm of each of Dr. Zelenka's hands.



A young enlisted woman was their assigned driver. She drove them west on US-95 and then took the exit east to Mercury. There was a brief pause at an entry gate; then they were on their way to bunker-29.

"I'm Amy, the young woman explained. "Yesterday, my coworker, Jim, took someone else up here. There are stories of strange lights; do either of you know anything about that?"

"We're just going to Area-29," explained Dr. Zelenka, "nothing special. Area-51 is to the northeast, where they *do* have strange lights."

Amy drove them along secondary roads across Area-25 and Yucca flats. There was nothing to see but desert scenery and an occasional jackrabbit.

As they started up a steep, dusty grade, Amy asked, "So what is at Bunker-29 that makes it deserve its own gate?"

Dr. Zelenka only politely answered that everything was classified. Val asked no questions. She just patiently listened and waited, sensing that she would soon know a very guarded secret.

The hummer slowed, turned, and stopped with the engine off at the attended gate. One of the two guards made the young woman wait while the other checked Dr. Zelenka's and Valerie Roger's authorization papers. After the guard made a telephone call for final verification, they were allowed to retrieve their luggage; then Amy started the hummer and headed back to Creech Air Force Base.

Dust from the departed hummer temporarily blotted out the setting sun, as Val followed Dr. Zelenka along a darkening path. One dim light illuminated a standard-sized door. When they reached it, Val realized that it was a side door to the bunker, and that the two of them were standing a ways from an enormous, sturdy metal roll-up door that was at least seven and a half meters high and wide. Dr. Zelenka opened the side door and beckoned to Val to enter before him.

Val and Dr. Zelenka each in sequence tripped an electronic eye of a buzzer as they walked down a short, narrow corridor that was banked with cabinets and cluttered work benches. "Some of my experiments," explained Dr. Zelenka as Val carefully eyed two strange electronic components.

"Doc, you're here!" yelled a tall, blond man who rushed to meet and embrace Dr. Zelenka. He wore matching light-blue work pants and shirt, and a dull-green flight jacket, the back of which had the same *Merriam-Cooper Flyways* insignia as that on the jet at the Creech air field. He also carried a cane, which he occasionally used to balance a limp. Val puzzled for a moment, wondering what rapport drove these two men. Her home office had been unable to give her anything more than basic statistics about these two seemingly unimportant men.

"You look well, Coop; I think the last three years have been good to you."

"Not really, Doc. At times, I think I am going to freak out at any moment. I think about Jean all the time. But you don't look that good, I think you need to eat more and get some exercise."

"I can't spare the time. I've got keep working on Taegellan physics. At times, I imagine that understanding is within reach; yet, it continues to elude me."

"And who is this?" asked Coop as he noticed Val.

"Coop, this is Valerie Rogers, a special government agent. Val, this is Lawrence Cooper, one of my dearest friends," explained Dr. Zelenka.

"But my friends just call me Coop," he said as he lightly shook her hand. *'A very nice-looking woman; it's too bad that I'm still so stuck on Jean,'* he thought to himself.

"I'm happy to meet you. Everyone just calls me Val," she added. *'He's tall and blond; it's too bad he's not a woman. And he's also got at least one of these tattoos!'* she thought to herself.

"Coop," began Dr. Zelenka as his voice became very serious, "someone has apparently commandeered the matter bridge. Five aircraft are missing. We must investigate, before a sixth jetliner vanishes tomorrow!"

"I had a bad feeling about this before I even got your message," said Coop. "I've started preparations on the ship."

"Good, because we should leave at once," urged Dr. Zelenka as he and Coop headed for the door to the main bunker.

"What ship are we...?" began Val as she followed them, but when she reached the door, it was as if she had lost her voice. Occupying most of the shadowy extent of the bunker, between the opposite roll-up doors, was a breathtaking, streamlined spaceship. It was iridescently colored in hues of gold, light-brown, yellow, and orange. It was more than fifteen meters long. The nose came to a long point, while small fins protruded from cylinders in the aft section that looked like engines. A girdle of contoured cylinders ringed the ship at its wider midsection. Forward of these cylinders, the upper section had several windows that glistened in silver-gold tones. A curving door opened upwards toward the windows, over a step-ramp that protruded diagonally from the side of the ship to the concrete floor of the bunker. Written across the vertical rear fin, in fancy black lettering, was the name *Terra-1*.

Val carelessly dropped her luggage and walked closer. There was a shallow, very dark bubble on the aft side of the ring of cylinders. Below it was a circular dark-green emblem, slashed diagonally by a black lightning bolt. It was surrounded by letters or symbols that she did not recognize, despite her familiarity with many languages and scripts. The emblem itself was familiar, however, because it matched the tattoos in hands of her two new associates.

The hull narrowed slightly and became a translucent yellow; then it gradually straightened and turned to orange at the aft engines and fins.

"It's fantastic; what else can I say!" commented Val enthusiastically. "What is this stuff anyway, glass?" she asked as she touched the hull.

"Metallic-composite ceramic," replied Dr. Zelenka.

Does it have warp- or hyper-drive? Val questioned.



“It has a type of gravitational drive,” explained Coop. “Centuries ago, while testing their first hyper-drive, the Taegellans discovered this artifact floating in space. They called the race that created it the *Legendary Ones with Pointed Ears*. It contained power jewels as well the secrets for controlling gravity.”

“Unfortunately, the Taegellans learned that travelling in hyper-drive kills living beings. The explorers all died prematurely!” explained Doc.

“Taegellans?”

“The technical culture behind this spaceship,” Coop replied.

"And these cylinders in the rear are engines?" she asked again. "But they don't even have any openings."

"Gravitonic impellers, like the ones that surround this ship near midsection," explained Coop. "They purge any contained air automatically when turned on. The gravitonic coil is housed inside this translucent yellow section."

"How far can it take us?" she asked.

"A long ways," sighed Coop.

"Possibly all the way back to Taegella," warned Dr. Zelenka, as he pulled a lever on a nearby wall. Some kind of electrical apparatus retracted from the side of the ship. "We must leave soon if we are to rendezvous with Flight 1244."

"Excuse me, Doc," said Coop vehemently as he pulled Dr. Zelenka aside, "but we simply cannot take Val. You know how dangerous it is!"

"Hey, I can take care of myself!" Val protested, as she pointed the index finger of her left hand at them in an assertive manner. "I am quite good in hand to hand combat, I know how to survive, and I speak twenty-nine languages."

"Unless you speak *Elazhakgi* or *Taekbulgi*, all those dialects won't do you any good. And there are unimaginable, demonic tyrants!" explained Coop.

Val quit arguing. She merely picked up her luggage and defiantly carried it up the stepped-ramp into the ship. Once in the ship, she turned to face the others as they boarded, vowing to resist any attempt to remove her. Coop and Dr. Zelenka motioned to her to come closer, as the stepped-ramp retracted and the outer airlock door closed downward. She had to jump backwards as a hidden inner airlock door moved upwards from the deck and sealed with a barely audible hiss. Val shuffled along as fast as possible in the narrow corridor to catch up with the others. Like the work benches of the entry way to the bunker, the walls of the corridor were packed with a variety of strange gadgets.

"We have our chores pretty much outlined," Explained Coop, "and it is now academic whether you are a good fit for this mission. Welcome aboard."

"You can stow your things in one of these lockers," explained Dr. Zelenka. Press the black button to open the door, and the red button to close the door."

"These oppositely-situated doors with the little round windows are the restrooms," added Coop. "They're similar to what we use on Earth, but flushing is totally automatic."

"These things here are ray guns?" she asked as she pointed to eight hand-gun-like objects, that seemed to be pressed into a special panel.

"They're disrupters," explained Coop. "They are in their charging slots. I can personally attest that they are quite nasty!"

* * *

There were eight seats in two rows. Coop was seated in the left front side, while Dr. Zelenka was seated to his right. Val took the seat behind Dr. Zelenka.

She hunted around for the seat belt assembly, but she could not find it. She also tried peeking out one of the windows, but the exterior lighting was not bright enough to penetrate the very dark aperture.

Val could not help noticing the somewhat-ovular, but oddly-curved viewscreen. It was even stranger when Coop switched it on, because it had unnatural colors and a three-dimensional effect. "Exactly who built this again of ours," she stated with a hint of a question.

"It was once the flagship of Prince Aahn of Xehbora on the planet Taegella," explained Dr. Zelenka. "He gave it to us out of gratitude. He is...."

"Quite a character," added Coop. "He and his Forest Techs embody everything that is good and bad with his species. Their technology is advanced, but they live in a quasi-feudal society. Aahn will fight to the death for any noble cause, but he ignores social injustice!"

"We will have to go closer to the Sun than Mercury to recharge the accumulator," warned Dr. Zelenka. "Even charging for three years with a thousand ampere service only got the reserve up to fifteen percent."

"Won't it be hot so close to the Sun?" asked Val worriedly.

"Normally, it would be," began Dr. Zelenka, "but we will be charging the accumulator. We will get quite cold during that process."

"The blinking blue light means the gravity brake is set," explained Coop. Brace yourself; I am transferring a bias charge to the gravitonic coil."

Val let off an involuntary grunt as an unseen energy wave seemed to pass through her entire body. She could not see or hear the energy pulsing in the gravitonic coil, but she could feel it.

"Okay," continued Coop, "we will soon be in motion. Repello field on; we're a couple of millimeters off the ground. Setting shields to low with radar negation, and activating inertial damper. I'm now purging the impellor tubes."

Val could hear unsynchronized popping and hissing sounds as all the impellor tubes were opened during the initialization of a null gravitonic field that expelled the air. "Opening the forward bunker door," said Dr. Zelenka.

"Now I carefully engage the gravitonic drive and release the gravity brake," explained Coop, as he pulled back on a complex-looking dual stick control.

Restraint bands automatically unfolded from the sides of the seats and gently moved to constrain each occupant. The *Terra-1* moved slowly at first; then it accelerated. The ship was eerily smooth and quiet; only the high-pitched rush of air around it indicated that it was in motion. Abruptly, there was no sound except for a low-pitched resonant drone that sounded halfway between a hum and a buzz. In one, unexpected leap, the *Terra-1* left the Earth's atmosphere entirely. Instinctively, Val braced herself for an overwhelming inertial impact, but it did not come.

**THE TERRA-1 HAS BEEN
TO THE SUN TO RECHARGE
ITS ACCUMULATOR. NOW
IT IS TIME TO TRACK
AERO CARRIBEAN FLIGHT
1244, TO PREVENT IT
FROM BEING SNATCHED
AWAY BY A MATTER BRIDGE
FROM ACROSS THE GALAXY....**





THREE THE PURSUIT

A moonlit horizon followed the setting Sun. It was still possible to see some of the colorful decorations on the Boeing 767 that was *Aero Caribbean* flight 1244, as it ascended above the clouds. Soon, the moon would set and the plane would only be visible because of its running lights.

Two miles to the rear, the radar-invisible *Terra-1* gracefully dropped from the sky and locked onto the jetliner's course. The spaceship kept to a visual dark spot behind the airliner.

Coop, wearing headphones with an attached mouth-piece speaker, had already established contact with Director Gordon by way of a radio operating on a secret, scrambled government frequency.

"I've just about shaken off the chill," complained Val. "If I had not experienced it, I would not have believed I could have gotten so cold so close to the Sun! Let me get this straight: you two are the only ones on this whole planet who can fly this ship?"

"That is correct," began Dr. Zelenka; "our hands have had what I call servo-metric conditioning, which allows us to operate these controls. That is why the government is so cooperative and has not seized this vessel."

"Just what is this accumulator?" asked Val somewhat impatiently.

"It is really a very sophisticated battery, containing an allotropic form of solid helium, about the size of a basketball," explained Dr. Zelenka. "I am still learning the physics, but it functions by breaking down energy and storing it with time stasis in standing waves within the empty space in atomic nuclei."

"Enough energy to run an electric automobile for several lifetimes," added Coop.

"Now that would sure solve our energy problems!" exclaimed Val.

"Sadly," admitted Dr. Zelenka, "all I have really accomplished is to install the radio and the remote door opener. This physics may be beyond my level of comprehension!"

"Here," urged Coop, as he tossed a small cylinder to Val.

Val caught the light-weight gadget, looked it over, and asked, "What is this?"

It's a force-7 torpedo. We have a complement of these."

Val handed it right back to Coop. "I'll take your word."

"Oh, it's harmless," explained Coop. "It's not charged. Torpedoes work the same as an accumulator, but on a smaller scale. A lot of energy is stored in stasis."

"What's it like: this planet, Taegella?" questioned Val, since she could not figure out what Coop was saying.

"It's a slightly larger version of Earth," explained Dr. Zelenka. "There is northern continent and a southern continent, as well as an equatorial ocean. The south polar area is open water, but the northern pole has a massive ice field, just like on Earth."

"Above the pole floats a huge city, home of the Quemgi, some kind of androgynous race, loathed or mistrusted by everyone else on the planet," added Coop, as he paused in his intermittent conversation with Director Gordon.

"What are these people like?" asked Val. "Of course, I am only assuming that they look something like us."

"They actually do," continued Dr. Zelenka, "resemble us; in fact, the similarities are extraordinary. They are very mammal-like, to the point of having similar dimorphic differences between males and females. They have vertical,

cat-like pupils in their eyes and pastel skin colors that vary by race. The most noticeable difference is that they have four digits on each hand and foot."

"No pointed ears?" asked Val jokingly.

"Their ears are round like ours. In fact, they were disappointed that we did not have pointed ears," explained Doc somberly.

"They are also nearly all left-handed, though" interjected Coop. "That is the basis of our problem: the legend of the coming of the right-handed super being, but now it's become all twisted!"

Val defensively pulled her left hand back, a reaction to being a minority in a right-handed world. "It all sounds so amazing, that we've found this race of beings so much like us!"

"Not really," explained Dr. Zelenka, "because they searched the galaxy with their *galactic lamp* hunting for a race with pointed ears, but they found us."

"Now we get to Kragg," began Coop bitterly, as he unsuccessfully held back the tears, "the most evil person I have ever met. I used to be in superb physical condition, but he left me like this, a near cripple."

"You're kidding me. Isn't he, Frank?" she asked as she turned to Dr. Zelenka.

"Empress Kragg was no joke," warned Dr. Zelenka. "She was the devil of our dreams, capable of the most diabolic plotting. She had a lethal combination of cunning, macabre ethics, physical strength, and maniacal delusions of grandeur."

"Hold on!" protested Val. "I heard both *he* and *she*. Are we talking about a man or a woman?"

Dr. Zelenka motioned to Coop to answer, as soon as he finished another report to Director Gordon, that the airliner was still ahead of them, flying in an open sky.

"We don't have time to go back to the beginning, back on Taegella," explained Coop, trying hard to describe events that were so emotionally-charged for him. "So many things went wrong, when Kragg tried a legendary transformation. I'll explain later."

Coop thought back to that epic scene at the *Waterfall of Oblivion*. Kragg had broken many bones in Coop's body and killed Jean. Coop fired a turbo-disrupter until Kragg turned black; then Kragg fell to his death in the falls.

With eyes as wide open as possible and her eyebrows arched, Val first looked at Doc; then she looked back at Coop. "You guys are serious, aren't you? It's not just a tall tale?"

"It all happened," began Dr. Zelenka sadly, "as Coop has recounted! Every unfortunate moment is true!"

"What's happening to the jet?" asked Val suddenly as she looked up at the screen and saw the jetliner seemingly bend and twist.

"Matter bridge ahead!" warned Dr. Zelenka. "We ought to be able to lock onto the plane with a coupling field and pull it out of danger."

"Air Traffic Control is losing contact," warned Coop. "I'm switching to gravimetric scan, so we don't lose her too!"

The viewscreen display had changed from its strange color mode to an even stranger mode. The image of the jetliner had stabilized, but it now looked like it was part of a stark black and white negative. Something else had appeared in the field of view: a curving orange-colored envelope of streamers that formed a growing funnel that had already swallowed the jetliner. Crimson flashes marked the dissipation of energy at the boundaries.

"Locking onto the jetliner...now!" warned Dr. Zelenka. Though they could not physically feel anything, the *Terra-1* began to buck and yaw under the load.

"Doc, we're being pulled inside too. Hurry with the dispersion field!" yelled Coop.

"It's not working," Dr. Zelenka explained in an exasperated tone, "it's just not working! The configuration has changed...or, this is not the same matter bridge! There's no time to decipher all the parameters! I'm shutting down the coupling! Get us out of here, Coop!"

Coop tried to steer away, but the *Terra-1* was now as trapped as the jetliner. The three of them helplessly watched as the world they knew was exchanged for a twisting orange cyclone, a void empty of any other object except the jetliner.

**THE TERRA-1 FOLLOWED
THE 767 INTO THE
VORTEX OF A MATTER
BRIDGE. UNEXPECTEDLY,
NEITHER COOP NOR DR.
ZELENKA WERE ABLE TO
EXTRACT THEMSELVES OR
THE JETLINER. THEY WERE
ON THEIR WAY ACROSS
THE GALAXY....**





FOUR ACROSS THE GALAXY

"We'd better get ready while we have the chance," said Coop after he returned from the restroom. "We will need to use universal translators. These stimulate the auditory nerves to produce an odd, echo-like translation, which is not exact and takes getting used to," he explained as he pinned a small disk to Val's collar; then he handed her a disrupter with a belt clip and explained, "You push the switch over the barrel back for maximum power; the switch will turn black. You push the switch forward for minimum power; it will turn red. Push the switch to the left to release the safety, and push the switch to the right to set the safety." Dr. Zelenka took a universal translator, but he waved his hand in refusal of the disrupter. Coop clipped it to his belt on his left side, opposite the one on his right.

"How long does this trip through the matter bridge last?" asked Val curiously.

"No more than fifteen to twenty seconds by normal time," Dr. Zelenka explained. "Yes, I realize we have already been here that long, but time within the matter bridge is dilated. For us, the trip will take almost two hours. The rough part will be the halfway point!"

"Just what will happen?" she asked with a note of concern. Val wondered for a moment if she had exercised good judgment by coming on this mission; nothing in her experience or training had prepared her for the current situation or for what was very likely to come.

"There's a flaw in the matter bridge," began Coop, "or rather, it does not gradually compensate for differences in angular momentum between Earth and Taegella, so there is a rough boundary zone at the midway point. The inertial damper will not protect us from all its effects. That's one reason we brought these sacks," he added as he handed one to her.

"I hope I don't need this," she wondered..

"Doc, can they tell that we are here?" asked Coop worriedly.

"I don't know," said Dr. Zelenka after a brief pause. "Perhaps we should move closer to the jetliner. When we emerge at the other end, we must aggressively resist being caught in the containment field. I'll boost the force shields to maximum with variable high frequency resonance."

* * *

Once Val returned to her seat from the restroom, she braced for the emergence from the matter bridge. All three of them had come through the momentum adjustment turbulence without incident, but now they had to prepare for an inevitable confrontation with hostile alien forces.

"Is the *Terra-1* armed?" she asked hopefully.

"It has a nuclear cannon in the nose," replied Dr. Zelenka, "force-7 torpedoes, and two flash disrupters: one on each side of the ship. Flash disrupters are similar to our sidearms, but the frequency rise time is extremely short, effective for metal components rather than organic matter. We had neglected to tell the Pentagon about any of its combat capabilities."

"Brace yourselves!" warned Coop. "I am moving ahead of the plane. Emergence in...eight seconds. I'm turning to generate shearing forces...now!"

As the *Terra-1* sped forward, a reddish haze appeared before them; then it engulfed them. The ship broke free of the containment field; then they plunged through intermixed layers of black and red-tinted clouds.

A look of consternation came over Coop as he took the ship above the lower cloud layer. "Something is wrong here, Doc!"

"This is not Taegella!" announced Dr. Zelenka. "This is another world on the other side of the galaxy. It has an orange sun, not a yellow-green sun. It is not Taegella, but Taegella cannot be very far away!"

"We have company!" warned Coop. "There are hundreds of them, perhaps over a thousand, approaching from several directions. The shields are already up; I'm activating flash disrupters. I'm not sure where to go!" On either side of the *Terra-1*, the dark bubbles split into eight receding segments; then the gimbaled barrels of the disrupters protruded through the openings.

"We have over eighty percent power," announced Dr. Zelenka as he activated a vertical black bar on the far left-hand side of the viewscreen.

"Can I help?" asked Val, trying hard to be useful. At that moment, there were several flashes of energy. The computer-guided disrupters automatically returned the fire. High frequency shrieks, followed by lower frequency reverberations, marked each firing. The rate crescendoed to the point that it was difficult to distinguish individual pulses from the weapons.

Special control panels lowered from the ceiling into the laps of Val and Dr. Zelenka. Each had a circular screen along with aiming and firing controls.

"Doc," said Coop, "you have the left-hand side. Val, you have the right hand side. Use the joystick to aim and the black button to fire. The guns work automatically, but you can select an override target. The commands are stored and the targets are tracked, so it's not a real-time operation!"

An object ahead exploded and the *Terra-1* passed through its expanding debris cloud. Val got her first good look at another one as it came in close and then veered away. It looked like a wide flying wedge, with a single active gun turret on top.

"They're Lazarrian strato-cruisers," said Dr. Zelenka, recognizing the vehicle type and the claw emblems which they all bore. "At least we know something about our opponents."

"How dangerous are they?" asked Val nervously, as she selected one on her firing panel.

"No match for us at all, being armed only with force-2 proximity torpedoes," replied Coop, "but there are a lot of them, and we only have a finite amount of power stored in the accumulator. But watch this," he said as he accelerated so fast that he quickly left all the fighters behind. Cruising at an altitude of about ten kilometers, he steered a course around the planet at high speed. Having passed over a region of dense forests, they crossed an inland sea that was surrounded by a ring of volcanoes. As they crossed into the night, the opposite shore turned into a wide plain that eventually led to a jungle strewn with small lakes.

"The planet is slightly smaller than Earth," said Dr. Zelenka as he took several measurements. "But it is denser and has a lot less surface water: just two moderate-sized polar oceans and an even smaller inland sea."

"We are coming up on the point where we emerged from the matter bridge," warned Coop, as they crossed back into the orange daylight. "The matter bridge must operate from that city on the horizon. Prepare for battle; we are going to surprise a few strato-cruisers!"

The *Terra-1* destructively drove through three waves of strato-cruisers before the enemy realized that they were there. Several cruisers exploded, while many dropped like rocks when their propulsion systems failed. However, so many survived the attack that the shields on the *Terra-1* were again subjected to a severe pounding, as proximity torpedoes exploded everywhere.



A jolt shook the entire ship. It was so intense that the inertial damper could not entirely negate its effect. A warning buzzer sounded, and an unusual blinking orange icon appeared next to the black bar on the viewscreen.

"We have a problem in the gravitonic coil!" yelled Coop. "We seemed to have suffered some kind of damage. I will try to gain altitude, but I don't think we'll be leaving this planet."

"A beam of energy from a city wall hit us!" said Dr. Zelenka. "The turret was automatically targeted and destroyed, but we must leave this area; our energy levels are dropping, and we cannot take any more such hits!"

"I'm heading for the opposite side of the planet. Maybe I can set her down on that plain beyond the inland sea," suggested Coop.

"Yes, yes," urged Dr. Zelenka, "I do not know if we have any allies on this strange world, but we do have the *Terra-1*! Perhaps its auto-fabrication circuits can repair the damage."

Although the flash disrupters were leaving a debris-strewn path below, wave after wave of strato-cruisers continued to pound their defenses. Coop was unable to coax the *Terra-1* above the fighters' maximum altitude. The black bar on the viewscreen was shrinking to a perilous size.

"We can't sustain this!" yelled Coop. "I'm shutting down the inertial damper." At that moment, for the first time, they actually felt the jarring effects of proximity torpedoes exploding against the shields.

"We have to abandon ship!" yelled Dr. Zelenka.

"Doc, you and Val must eject now! I'll stay a few moments longer to cover for you!" ordered Coop.

"No!" Val protested.

"Hurry!" yelled Dr. Zelenka as he used all his strength to pull her by an arm to the entrance to a transparent escape pod cabin. After she was seated, he instructed, "Pull that lever to close the pod; then push that button to eject. We'll descend on automatic, and the pods will stay close to each other."

"I don't have any of my personal effects!" she protested.

"No time; the emergency supplies within the pod will have to suffice," he explained as he sat in the pod next to her and closed the door. Val closed the door to her pod a second later. "Let's go!" he yelled.

Both Val and Dr. Zelenka uttered a brief, involuntary shriek as their pods blew away their shrouds and dropped toward the ground in free fall, within two meters of each other. The four landing struts on each pod extended automatically. When Val looked upwards, through a clear panel in the cab, in search of the *Terra-1*, she discovered that it had already been obscured by several layers of thick clouds.

Coop waited ten seconds for the escape pods to lose altitude; then he fired the first tactical nuclear charge from the nose gun into the swarm of strato-cruisers. He did not wait to count how many were destroyed. As he turned the *Terra-1* in a sweeping arc, he fired the four remaining charges. He continued to sweep through ever wider arcs; Coop used the entire supply of force-7 torpedoes. The power level bar hovered near zero as he approached the opposite shore of the inland sea.

Coop set the ship on auto-pilot. He paused for a moment to reduce the length of his telescoping cane; then he raced for the nearest escape pod. The shields were going to fail at any moment.

Daylight lasted only seconds as Coop's escape pod plunged into the nighttime sky over the expansive plains area. He set the pod on manual drive; he wanted to choose his landing area. He lost sight of the ship for a few seconds; then he saw a bright flash that turned into a streaking meteor. Moments later, the repello field within the pod started to break his fall. Coop watched the *Terra-1* crash to the ground on the horizon.

'I think we'll be here for a while. This time I had the foresight to put my partner in charge of my personal affairs. This was why he made me change the named from Cooper-Merriam flyways to Merriam-Cooper Flyways!' he thought to himself.

**EXPECTING TO SEE
TAEGELLA, THEY ARRIVED
AT VULCRA, INSTEAD.
THE TERRA-1 WAS DAMAGED
AND CRIPPLED IN BATTLE.
THE TERRA-1 WAS LOST,
BUT ALL ON BOARD SAFELY
EJECTED....**





FIVE Fugitives

Upon landing, Dr. Zelenka quickly exited his escape capsule. He did not even bother to test the air, because there was no time to delay, nor was there enough air within the cab for any kind of survival anyway. Having removed the case of survival gear from the capsule, he switched off the main breaker to reduce all electrical functions to zero. He stepped down into a weird, murky swamp.

Val had landed about eight meters away. She had landed intact, but she was staying in her cabin. Dr. Zelenka quickly moved to her location, while he breathed through his mouth. The air seemed to have adequate oxygen content, but some of the pungent odors present were disagreeable. His footing felt solid, but could not clearly see where he was walking, because patches of the ground around him were covered by a thick green fog that never seemed to rise higher than about ten centimeters. The offensive odor seemed to come from the curious fog. Some kind of small, chattering animals roamed through the fog, wildly bumping into his boots.

"We cannot stay here, bad odors or not!" warned Dr. Zelenka as he finally coaxed Val to open her door. As she grabbed her survival case, Dr. Zelenka switched off the main breaker in her pod.

He continued, "Our situation is not good, but it will be far worse if the Lazarrians capture us! It is a few minutes before sunset, so we must move as fast as possible before we camp for the night."

"What is this stuff?" asked Val as she stepped into the fog.

"I think it is something like an algae-laden mist. I also think there are small animals that race through it, eating the tiny floating plants as they go."

"We should contact Coop?" asked Val.

"They would trace us through the high-band radio signal. The pods have a transponder locator beacon, but those have been shut down at the main breakers. We must leave this area!" urged Dr. Zelenka.

"All these plants and trees are different, to say the least. I wonder if...." said Val as her question was answered. Some large, unseen animal noisily walked through the forest nearby. It emitted a series of low-pitched, hoarse-sounding cries. Fortunately, it was moving away from them.

"I replaced half of the things in these cases with essentials from Earth," remarked Dr. Zelenka; "however, the flashlights like this one are much better than any on Earth! And these spectrum analyzers are invaluable!" he added as he pivoted on his feet through a full 360 degrees while he pointed a device that looked much like a television remote control.

"Is it telling you anything?" she asked as she tried to figure out its small display screen.

"I've got a chart that translates exactly, but that takes time, so I will take rough guesses. There are no major sources of nuclear radiation nearby. I think there are some aircraft in the distance," explained Dr. Zelenka, "and I think there may be some kind of city towards the pole from our location. We will have to use these devices sparingly--you have one too--they can be detected."

It was getting dark quickly, so Val hurriedly found her light and switched it on. She had accidentally pointed it upwards in the trees, where she momentarily illuminated an unusual flying animal. It looked like a large woodpecker, but it had wide, oval bug-eyes and was covered with greenish fur instead of feathers. It flew off into the darkness, carrying something in its beak that resembled a long blue caterpillar.

After an hour of rapid walking in darkness, having left the ground fog behind them, Dr. Zelenka finally stopped. "I'm not young enough for this pace. We are not far enough from the landing site, but we must camp here. We can set up an intruder screen," he said as he removed eight slim cylinders from his survival case. He motioned to Val to remove hers also.

Val never had a chance, as a vehicle sporting bright search lights passed almost overhead. Val and Dr. Zelenka grabbed their survival cases and ran nearly blindly through the forest, as they shielded their lights with their hands. They could hear more aircraft flying toward the area. They spooked a long-necked animal that had been eating fruit, inducing it to gallop away.

"We should follow it!" urged Val.

"Yes, but I could not keep up the previous pace," complained Dr. Zelenka. "I will collapse at any moment."

"Just a few minutes more, Frank," she urged. As she turned toward Dr. Zelenka for a moment, she came to an abrupt stop and dropped her flashlight and survival case. She had run into something or someone, and it was big. Dr. Zelenka's light revealed a menacing humanoid form, as it threw an object to the ground. The object exploded, creating a bright, constant light. It was a flare.

Val tried to move back, but the dog-headed *Bozarg* guard was faster than she expected. He grabbed her right arm and lifted her into the air. She tried to use her disrupter, but she could not release the safety with a single hand. She kicked him in the head, causing them both to fall. When she hit the ground, she rolled back to her feet. In a single motion, she turned, pushed the switch to the left and forward, and fired the disrupter. The weapon emitted an ear-piercing, blast of sound and energy as it burned through the *Bozarg's* black uniform, killing him instantly.

Two more *Bozarg* guards charged from the darkness. They fell near the first *Bozarg* guard. One of them had been carrying a turbo-disrupter. As Val

reached down to pick it up, she was startled by gunfire. She turned to see another *Bozarg* guard, who had sneaked up behind her, fall dead.

"I...had to kill him!" cried Zelenka as he put the tiny Beretta back into his concealed shoulder holster. "I am not a fighter!"

"You are a great man!" she cried as she embraced and kissed him. "If only you had more energy. We have to run; they'll flock to the light!"

"I've caught my breath. I can do it!" he assured her.

* * *

It was a few minutes before dawn, as Dr. Zelenka and Val stirred from their very brief rest at the trunk of a huge tree. Fortunately, it had been a warm, summer-like night. They quickly ate and drank some of their provisions; then they headed toward a rocky clearing, a welcome break from the confines of the nearly-endless forest.

"Can we eat the fruit and drink the water?" asked Val.

"Only if the Lazarrians can," responded Dr. Zelenka. "Their food is not very palatable, but it is edible. If only we can reach one of their bases on this planet, without being detected."

"Why is it suddenly so quiet?" asked Val, as they watched the nameless orange star clear the trees on the horizon. As Dr. Zelenka prepared to use his spectrum analyzer, large nets were catapulted high into the air. There were so many that the two of them could not dodge them all. When the nets landed on them, they were as sticky as a spider's web. Both Dr. Zelenka and Val found themselves to be totally immobilized. They could scarcely even breathe.

After they were pulled from the nets, they were held in the iron grip of several *Bozarg* guards. They led to the boarding ramp of a strato-transport, as *Zarg* guards placed mind-control headbands on their heads.

* * *

Val stepped forward, but suddenly the boarding ramp was gone; someone shoved her into a dirty, dungeon-like room that had taken its place. The door slammed and bolted behind her, before she could free herself from all the cobwebs and turn around. A startled, noisy *squeaker* climbed toward the ceiling. The room was filthy. It had a flimsy bed that was frayed. It also had a sink and a toilet, both of which were covered with a thick scum. Light came into the room through glass bricks that ran along the ceiling line of one wall.

Val did not remember the trip to the cell, so she deduced that they had somehow suppressed her memory. She hurriedly checked her pockets, but everything that she had stashed there was gone, except several wads of tissue paper. She had even hidden a small knife in each boot: they were both missing. She wondered why it felt like something was pressing against her forehead; her fingers could not find any foreign objects. She presumed that Dr. Zelenka had been placed in a similar cell. Perhaps it was next to hers.

"Frank, can you hear me?" she asked repeatedly, as she walked the perimeter of the cell. No reply came. Finally, she sat on the edge of the bed, with her eyes toward the light. She was tired. After a few minutes her mind drifted toward a contemplative mood; then she almost fell asleep.

Val turned as the door unbolted. An alien woman with reddish skin entered, as a *Bozarg* guard stood behind her in the open doorway. She paused for a moment, looking Val over with a regal demeanor. She was wearing a black dress, which was complimented with a black cape and a wide red belt, to which was attached a dagger in its scabbard. Her body was adorned with red-colored ornaments and jewelry everywhere. Her white-streaked, reddish-brown long hair and eyebrows complimented her wide brown eyes, with their nearly vertical pupils. Each pinkish hand had a thumb and three fingers. Though she was undeniably an alien from another world, she was also recognizable as a woman. She was not particularly attractive, but she was imposing.

"Welcome to Vulcra," she began in an insincere, deep tone. "Your name is...." It was an order. Val was startled how well the universal translator worked.

"I am Valerie Rogers. Who are you, and where is Dr. Zelenka? And what about all those poor people on the jetliner?" asked Val, remembering at the last moment why she had come to this planet.

"I ask the questions here; you are my prisoner. I am Empress Kragg, ruler of the known universe. Where is Lawrence Cooper? He shall not escape this time!"

"Wow, she sure doesn't look like she used to be a man!" thought Val. "He ejected from the *Terra-1* after Frank and I ejected. I do not know where he is."

"It does not matter," said Kragg as her eyes continued to scan Val closely. "When word reaches him that I hold his friends captive, he will come, but he will die this time! My sister shall turn him into a helpless woman, and I shall suck the life from his body, after my guards have had the pleasure of his company!"

"That's really sick!" complained Val, convinced that she needed a plan of action fast. "Someone with your intelligence should know how to lead a better life! Hey, you're supposed to be dead! Coop saw you die!"

"Do not mock me, woman!" commanded Kragg with a stern gesture. "Your friend Cooper neglected to check the waterfall closely. He would have seen that my cape caught on a spike high up in the falls and spared me from death. He will die for that error. Your turn also will come; you cannot resist me!" Kragg stared intensely into Val's eyes. After a few seconds, Kragg was clearly becoming frustrated.

"I've been conditioned against hypnosis, and I'm left-handed!" yelled Val as she raised her left hand in defiance. Val pretended to walk away from Kragg. In a single motion, she pivoted and kicked Kragg in the neck and grabbed the dagger from her belt and plunged it toward her chest. Kragg's right hand stopped the blade as its point touched the fabric of her dress. Val winced; with all her

strength, she could not push the dagger any farther, and Kragg had a grip like a vise.

Kragg turned the dagger toward Val, who had never felt so helpless. As a demonstration of her strength, Kragg drew a shallow cut across Val's throat with the tip of the blade before returning the weapon to its scabbard. "Your life belongs to me now, as soon will the lives of your entire species!" she yelled as she placed one hand around Val's throat; with the other hand on a segment of Val's belt, she picked Val up and tossed her against a wall. "Since you are so defiant, you shall wear the band of forgetfulness and serve my guards as a pleasure maid. Your friend Dr. Zelenka also vowed to resist, but he is blindly serving my scientists as a laboratory assistant."

Val was barely conscious as she watched Kragg leave. She did not have enough strength to resist the placement of the mind-control headband by one of Kragg's guards. Once it was in place, it was too late.

**AFTER EJECTING FROM
THE TERRA-1, DR.
ZELENKA AND VAL
LANDED TOGETHER AND
WERE EVENTUALLY
CAPTURED BY AGENTS OF
KRAGG. MEANWHILE,
COOP LANDED FARTHER
AWAY IN A REALLY
DESOLATE AREA....**





SIX ALONE IN THE WASTELAND

Coop sat out a bizarre storm within the confines of the escape pod. It was amazing that the pod had landed safely, right next to some kind of ruins. Outside the cab of the pod, large windblown drops of rain fell with noisy impacts. However, that was the least of the problems. Brief sparkles of energy flashed in the dark sky and on the ground all around Coop, because electrically charged, gritty particles of sand were mixed with the raindrops. Coop neither had the proper gear, nor did he know where to flee in the night to avoid such weather. He had shut down the main breaker to avoid detection, and he had cracked the door slightly to get fresh air. Water dripped into the opening throughout the night.

The downpour was too fierce to justify running to the ruins, and Coop had already ascertained that several animals had taken refuge in the main structure. He certainly did not want to risk tangling with strange creatures during a storm; some of them could even be venomous.

Because of jet-lag-like effects, Coop could only sleep intermittently. He had much to reflect on; two days ago he would not have imagined that he would now be sitting in a spent escape pod on an alien, unknown planet tens of thousands of light-years from home. He speculated that thousands of kilometers separated him from Dr. Zelenka and Val, and he had no idea how they had fared. Tomorrow he would have to face a hostile world with no more than the clothes he was wearing, his cane, two disrupters, and the contents of the survival case stored in the base of the pod.

His mind wandered to thoughts of Jean. He vividly remembered her, that day when he picked her up at her office to take her to the airport. She was going to accompany him and Doc to a vacation getaway in Baja California. She had looked so pretty, busily finishing her work as she talked to a client on the phone. Suddenly, Coop experienced an unnerving premonition, as he sensed that she and he would soon be reunited. It could only mean one thing: he was about to die!

The morning brought calm weather and new revelations. At least where Coop had landed, the terrain did not much resemble a plains area. Despite the average change in elevation being minimal, the area around him was rugged. It was a repeating mosaic of boulders, rolling hills, waterholes, and sparse vegetation. A few meters away, were the ruins consisting of a building and walls, but not much else.

Coop hurriedly ate his breakfast, which consisted of dried fruit and water. He did not know how to gauge the consumption of his provisions. It was time to move on, but he first had to pick a route. After he had extended his cane, he paused scan the horizon with his spectrum analyzer. The device indicated there might be a city of some kind in the direction of the inland sea, the coast of which was about thirty-five kilometers away. He judged that he was better off to risk capture than to wander aimlessly in such a wasteland, especially since his encounter with Kragg had robbed him of his youthful agility. His only consolation was that the surface gravity of this planet was a few percentage points less than that of Earth.

* * *

Coop rested under the sheltering cover of a grove of trees, as he took two aspirin to relieve the pain of the aggravated torn cartilage in his left knee. He was to have had it operated on in two months. It was one of many ailments he continued to develop, long after his fight with Empress Kragg. Coop thanked Dr.

Zelenka for having the foresight to pack the aspirin; however, it would soon run out. Coop also had no shaving supplies.

Checking his watch, he suspected that the length of a day on the planet was longer than on Earth. Noontime temperatures were hot, partly because of the equatorial latitude of the wasteland, but mostly because of the lack of any major forests or jungles. The temperature was to his advantage, however, because it made it impossible for the strato-cruisers that occasionally flew over to detect his presence with their thermal scanners.

Coop had reached the volcanic rim of the sea without incident. *'It's really a fantastic planet, with all its rich topography and life forms. It's too bad I can't really enjoy it.'* thought Coop. The temperature began to drop as he ascended a pass between two twin volcanic cones, each over 850 meters in elevation. When he reached the pass, he was finally able to see his destination: the large inland sea. The coastline stretched across the horizon. Far in the direction that Coop had assigned as the south, he could see the unmistakable structures of a small city. After a pause to eat and drink again, Coop searched for the most direct path to that city. He was sure he could reach it before dusk.

* * *

With the city but minutes away, Coop discovered a herd of blue, bug-eyed shovel-mouthed grazing animals, which somewhat resembled squat camels with a horn. He had never seen such animals before, and he did not know they were *barkgas*. As he made his way around the herd, he discovered a stone pathway. He wondered who had made it; for all the plants and animals he had seen were of non-Taegellan origin, yet the strato-cruisers all had Lazarrian emblems. Offset from either side of the path, there were several curious metallic-ceramic structures, about four meters wide and five meters high, that looked much like giant gray cylinders buried squarely in the ground.

Coop left the path and hid behind some trees, when a door in the side of one of the cylinders opened; then he heard several voices. A group of five women emerged without noticing him. They were of mixed Taegellan races. By Taegellan standards, they seemed taller than average, though two of them were unusually tall. The two taller ones wore brown-striped green minidresses, while the other three wore similar green-striped brown dresses. They all wore similar gold and silver earrings. Coop was being especially cautious, fearing they might be armed.

Coop continued to follow them, separated by vegetation, along an indistinct parallel pathway. It was difficult to remain stealthy, because the alternate path was covered with gravel and constantly switched between up and down slopes. Finally, even using his cane as a brace, he took a misstep and tripped. Coop found himself sliding down a gravel slope directly toward the women, who could not fail to see him coming.

One of the women grabbed his cane. She and another prevented him from getting to his feet, while two others quickly confiscated his disrupters and his survival case. They kept the disrupters aimed his way, but with the safeties off. Coop was handed his cane, which he used it to right himself. "We are friends," said one of the women softly, who was holding a disrupter.

"You're fortunate that we found you first, Earther," said the tallest one. "Empress Kragg has a large reward posted for you. Come with us...we must get indoors at once! Did you use these weapons?"

"No, I was very careful," said Coop defensively. "I even avoided leaving footprints, if at all possible."

"Good, because they can be traced by Lazzarian scanners when the safety is turned on!" she added.

"What planet is this?" asked Coop.

"Speak softly," urged one of the women dressed in brown. "If your male voice attracts attention, word will spread. Not everyone can be trusted."

Coop continued to look the women over as they approached a cluster of buildings. The taller women, with their olive skin and rust-colored eyes, were both Xehboran, from the kingdom of Prince Aahn. The other three, with their pale olive skin and ruby eyes, were Relkash, from the mountain kingdom of Princess Telanna. Coop had spent much time in both kingdoms, but he could not recall having seen any women as tall as four of these women. Perhaps Taegellans grew taller on this planet.

"You must hide in these trees while we bring you a change of clothing," insisted one of the women in brown.

"It is necessary," agreed the tallest one, "because anyone can tell that you are obviously a man."

Coop tried to protest, but they made him wait while the tallest one went to get some alternate clothing. Within ten minutes, she had returned.

"I can't wear this stuff," protested Coop, when they realized that it was all Taegellan women's clothing: a medium-length wig, a blue minidress with matching belt and sandals, along with a strange undergarment, a fabric mesh that suggested the shape of a woman.

"We have no time for discussion," said the tallest one as she pointed at Coop with her left hand. "Please change at once! We will carry your clothing in this bag."

Reluctantly, Coop changed to the new clothing, which fit somewhat loosely. It had taken all his effort to make them avert their eyes from him while he stripped. As they placed the wig on his head, they also made some adjustment that affected the undergarment. It abruptly shrank, re-contouring his body and taking away his breath in the process. They prepared all his exposed skin on his face, shoulders, arms, and legs with a small device that caused his body hair,

including his beard, to disintegrate painlessly; then they spray tinted the same areas in light red.

Coop was not cooperative, so they prodded him with his own cane to encourage him to shuffle along the path. He felt very self-conscious, especially when they passed other women; however, no one gave him a second look. The approach of dusk helped his disguise.

The city had an odd, sterile concrete look to it, even by typical Lazarrian standards. It was composed entirely of hemispherical domes, cylinders capped with shallow domes, and combinations of the two. Ahead lay what looked like a huge igloo, complete with a low, arched entrance passage. Coop gave a sigh of relief once they were finally indoors.

"Welcome to Vulcra, Lawrence Cooper," said the tallest one, as she gave him a firm handshake. "You do not recognize me, do you?"

"We've met?" responded Coop curiously. She looked vaguely familiar, but Coop could not remember having met her before. He never forgot an attractive woman, not even an alien woman.

"I am now called Raina. This is Talee, Vuran, Akmele, and Ustva. You once knew me as Captain Atilsan, of the Xehboran Royal Guard."

"Atilsan...is that really you?" asked Coop slowly. "You're disguised as a woman. You've done an excellent job of it...I can't tell!" Coop looked at a mirror and added, "I do not even recognize myself!"

"We are not in disguise, using prosthetics, or doing any impersonation," explained Raina. "A few months ago, four of us were men, but we have since all been transformed and conditioned to look, talk, act, and even think like women. The only male features left are our genetics."

"Isn't that a little severe?" asked Coop.

"Yes, but it was necessary," replied Raina, "if not enlightening. Only as women can we move about freely on this world, which was once a minor colony

of Taegella. We run the precious metal mines in the area. Kragg fled to this planet, and it is here where she is directing the restoration of her empire."

"Kragg lives?" asked Coop tearfully. *'But I saw her tumble into the Waterfall of Oblivion!'*

"Unfortunately," began Raina, "she survived the *Waterfall of Oblivion* when her cape caught on a spike, about a quarter of the way down. She is incredibly lucky. Her factories in the second asteroid belt now operate continuously, rebuilding a new fleet to further her ambitions. All available men have been sent to those factories, if they are lucky, or else they have been transformed into members of her *Bozarg* guard, or worse. Kragg's evil sister, Zolanda, is the mistress of transformation. It is Zolanda who has transformed all the people captured from your world into obedient, expendable women!"

"Including Dr. Zelenka and Val?" asked Coop nervously.

"No, they are bait!" Raina warned. "They are safe so long as you are free, so you must not go to them! Kragg will do anything to capture you. It is an obsession with her...look how she carelessly sacrificed over six hundred strato-cruisers in her mad pursuit!"

"Can the other people from my world be helped?" asked Coop.

"Their transformations are no longer reversible by any means we know... too much time has passed. The plight of them and your friends has to wait," added Raina sadly.

"But I have to go to them at once!" protested Coop, realizing how absurd he would look fighting the way he was dressed. "Kragg cannot be allowed to inflict his atrocities on them."

"Kragg's citadel is nearly impenetrable," continued Raina. "Four of the guards are synthoids, hideous mechanical likenesses of Kragg herself. Kragg also has a vicious *skamatar* in her power. It is a large, nearly-indestructible anthropoid from a distant planet. If Kragg catches you, Zolanda will transform

you into a woman...then Kragg will suck out your life force and toss your remains to the *skamatar!*"

"Maybe that is my fate, to be killed by that mythical beast," commented Coop sadly. "Last night I had this premonition that Jean and I would be united. If I suffer death, it would come true!"

"Such will not happen," insisted Raina. "I have orders from Prince Aahn to take you back to Taegella! The prince needs you to help him rally his forces. The people are still terrified by Kragg, but they will follow Lawrence Cooper, the right-handed warrior from another world. We will fabricate a story that you are at large on Vulcra, so we can saturate the reporting networks with false sightings. Kragg will be distracted from her empire-building while she blindly pursues you across the planet."

"I'm not much of a warrior any more, especially dressed as I am...look at the shape Kragg left me in. This return trip, which for me was totally unplanned, is so incredible," declared Coop as he finally sat in a chair, trying to get comfortable wearing an artificially contoured minidress and sandals. It felt good to relax his sore muscles after a day on foot. "So how has Aahn been doing in the time since we left Taegella?"

"He has been very moody and superstitious. But he did marry Princess Telanna. It is a happy marriage, and they now have two children."

"Aahn, the patriarchal anti-feminist, bisexual leader of the Xehborans, married the ultra-feminist, heterosexual leader of the matriarchal kingdom!" gasped Coop. "It would seem impossible just to visualize all the divergent customs. Aahn was against most of the humanoid rights reforms we had suggested to him! And you're a woman now! Did he grant equal rights to women? Has he started to reform all the archaic Xehboran and Taegellan laws?"

"Mostly, no, but maybe someday," replied Raina. "We willingly undertook this transformation, but by doing so Talee and I forfeited all our male rights."

Though our cause is noble, our families have declared us dead! Since we cannot bear children, our status is even less than that of real women! Vuran is a real woman, and she is in charge here. That is the final blow to our egos."

"But we of the Mountain Kingdom suffered only a little pain because of transition," explained Akmele. "As women, we will prosper financially and politically much better than men!"

"Why don't you all move to Relkash when this is all over?" asked Coop.

"In Relkash, Xehboran women are considered inferior, suitable only for menial tasks," explained Raina.

"And none of you make suitable women at all," commented Vuran.

"Remember, if you obey me and follow my training, you will prosper...otherwise, you will not amount to much!"

"Relkash women are all unreasonable tyrants," complained Talee.

"Can I switch back to my regular clothing now?" implored Coop, remembering how tiring he found Taegellan sexual and political posturing.

"Not until you are in the shuttle," replied Raina. "Let us eat and drink now...later we will depart. The shuttle is not far. It is a null-ship, our best detection-negative design...Kragg does not know it and others are here."

"And it will take us all the way to Taegella?" questioned Coop.

"The shuttle cannot travel far, but we will rendezvous with a stealth-ship that can. Taegella is four days distant," explained Raina.

During dinner, Coop learned about the major events that had transpired in the three years since he and Dr. Zelenka had returned to Earth from Taegella. An inner sense warned him that history was repeating itself, that he was being drawn like a pawn into a struggle over which he had no control.

* * *

Coop was surprised that he could not see the shuttle; all he saw was an open, lighted hatchway surrounded by a shimmering darkness that revealed more

of the nighttime terrain than of the spacecraft. Having changed back into his own clothing, he bade farewell to the others as the airlock door closed; then he took a seat next to Raina as they prepared for take-off.

"You look most relieved," comment Raina as the shuttle headed skyward. "I understand how you felt...the discomfort is one reason why we decided to undergo the complete transformation, not to mention that Kragg's spies are always betraying men in imperfect female disguise."

"I trust I'll never have to dress like that again," sighed Coop.

**COOP MET TAEGELLAN
FRIENDS IN A VULCRAN CITY,
WHO PROMPTLY ALTERED HIS
PLANS TO RESCUE DOC AND
VAL. INSTEAD, HE WAS
WHISKED AWAY TO TAEGELLA
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PRINCE AAHN....**





SEVEN RETURN TO TAEGELLA

Coop watched expectantly as the spaceship, piloted by a Relkash woman named Mora, passed near the small outer moon on its descent towards the planet Taegella. The larger second moon was a thin crescent on the horizon, while the first and largest moon, in gibbous phase, seemed to hover near the Southern continent.

Coop strained to see the fabled floating city as they passed above the North Pole, but it was lost in the massive shroud of clouds. Ahead lay the marshy land of the Teeli, the blue-skinned Water Techs, and the next-door-neighbors of the Lazarrians on the Northern continent. Shortly after reaching Lazarr on their diagonal trajectory toward the Southern continent, they crossed into the night side of the planet.

A day on Taegella lasted twenty-four hours and forty-six minutes by Earth time. It was more than an hour before midnight when the spaceship gently landed in the well-lighted main airfield of Xehbora. Crisscrossed beams of search lights filled the sky with an array of pastel colors. A crowd of officials ushered Coop off the stepped-ramp and into the main terminal building.

Prince Aahn, dressed in his royal green regalia and looking more impish than usual, was there to greet Coop. Since Coop had last seen him, he had grown a fancy beard that was reminiscent of a goatee. Face-to-face, with hands on each other shoulders, they stepped out a half circle on the floor. This was the

traditional Taegellan form of greeting. Making an obvious effort to use his right hand, the prince then firmly shook hands with Coop.

"It is so good to see you again, Lawrence Cooper!" he literally shouted. "Sorry about the pain that Kragg has inflicted on your people. Soon, we shall be ready to deal with her and her new fleet."

'I've got to quit thinking of this guy like a used-car salesman; I need him dearly', Coop warned himself. "It is good to see you again too," replied Coop somewhat insincerely.

"And these are mine," he added with pride as he brought over two young children. "These are my children: Alix and Reali. They have their father's ambitions and their mother's stubbornness. They are already rivals, since they both expect to rule: Alix because he is a Xehboran male, and Reali because she is a Relkash female. In the future, we will have to resolve this conflict."

"Democracy, along with tolerance and humanoid rights is your solution; I've told you that many times," Coop reminded him.

"Someday, perhaps," replied Aahn; then he changed the subject, "Still using the cane? Those doctors should have done better!"

"They had never seen someone from Earth before," explained Coop; "besides, my own doctor said that they had done an excellent job. We human beings are not designed to be bashed by a super-strong person like Kragg, who should be dead!"

"Her final hour fast approaches," said Aahn with a genuine feeling of confidence. "Here, let me show you on that viewscreen. Our factories in space are busy expanding our fleet. Unlike Kragg, we have some of your *democracy* at work, as we create a new generation of spacecraft, collectively designed by the best scientists and engineers on our planet. With you here, everyone will be encouraged to step up the pace of production. We may be ready within six months!"

"Sounds great, but what I really need now is a good night's sleep," admitted Coop as he tried to suppress a yawn.

"I am sorry, my friend; I should be a better host. One of my aides will take you to premium guest quarters. Late tomorrow afternoon, we will discuss strategy."

"Sounds great," replied Coop without much enthusiasm. *'He is already implicating me in some grand scheme; I can feel it!'*

* * *

Coop slept until late in the morning. The night had not been entirely restful, because he was worried about the fate of Dr. Zelenka and Val. He was also increasingly troubled by thoughts about Jean.

He was very happy to find all his clothing freshly cleaned and waiting for him, but he was irritated to learn that Aahn had left the planet to go inspect the spaceship factories. One of Aahn's aides had been assigned to take care of Coop's needs, but Coop found him to be obtuse and unsatisfactory. After much insistence, Coop finally persuaded the man to take him to the factories.

* * *

"This is one of four of our new dreadnoughts," explained Aahn to Coop excitedly, as the two of them peered through the transparent metal window into the construction area, where the atmospheric pressure was much lower. "They are eight times larger than our older starships; in fact, they are too large to generate a high speed gravitonic field envelope; it would take those eight months to reach Vulcra. We are also building two maneuverable tactical battle platforms, far larger than any spaceship. It would take those two years to reach Vulcra."

"So how are we going to attack in six months?" asked Coop curiously, realizing that Aahn never told everything.

"We will launch the attack on time," he said with a big grin. "We have a new and improved, and much larger, version of the matter bridge. We have Dr. Zelenka to thank for solving the engineering equations."

"He would be happy to hear that," said Coop, "because he is having trouble integrating all your physics." *'The universal translator can't do the nuances, but I think Aahn seems far more nervous than usual!'*

"Not only will we attack on time, but we will attack with complete surprise," added Aahn. "Kragg will not see us coming and have time to prepare her defenses."

As a morale boost, Aahn broadcast a brief interview with Coop to all of Taegella. Aahn was such a master at eliciting strained or ambiguous responses that Coop imagined him making a good talk show host on Earth. Afterwards, Coop was so tired of all the evasive conversation that he decided to find out what was going on.

"Aahn, I've known you for many years, so I've come to sense when you are hiding something. What is this secret you are keeping from me?" asked Coop assertively.

"Utash of Quem has requested an audience with you, to discuss the menace of Empress Kragg!" Aahn blurted out. "I do not know about you, but I really do not want to visit a place that gives me nightmares! The Quemgi are the masters of dark, mystical forces. They are also very strange!"

"My friend," began Coop as he put his right hand on Aahn's shoulder, "I will risk anything if it means helping my friends. Give me a shuttle; if necessary, I'll go alone."

"I will take you there," Aahn assured him with a shaky delivery.

* * *

A lone, green strato-shuttle, constructed in the shape of a flattened ellipsoid, that was horizontally girdled by a fat yellow ring, with a tall tail on the

rear, drove toward the pole at low altitude. It was dwarfed by the massive ice fields that sped by. Though it was indistinct, at first, in the swirling cold haze, the floating city burst into view. It looked much like a precious turquoise jewel surrounded by the faint blue-green streamers of the Taegellan aurora. It consisted of two saucer-shaped sections of a split ellipsoid, which were connected by three thick vertical columns that were equal in length to the height of one of the half-ellipsoids. A shimmering envelope of steam marked the boundary of the force shield that surrounded the entire city.

They passed over the ruins of a long-abandoned ground city, encrusted in an icy sheath. The sky city was far more secure and easier to maintain.

"My instruments show a tunnel through the shield, and I am receiving a landing guidance signal," announced Aahn. "My priests warned me not to go here; of course, I am a poor listener!"

Coop realized that his initial estimate that the city was a kilometer in diameter had been highly inaccurate. He could see that the ellipsoids had had a diameter of at least five kilometers, as the shuttle passed into the gap between the two ellipsoids. The base of the upper ellipsoid looked like the open sky, while the top of the lower ellipsoid contained gardens and ponds.

"Was that a flying girl?" asked Coop abruptly as he twisted his head in an attempt to look to the rear, but the hull of the shuttle blocked his view. He could have sworn that he had seen a young girl wearing a long, light-blue dress, who was suspended in midair.

"The Quemgi possess many dark powers," explained Aahn. "It is rumored that they have mastered levitation, as well as the ability to pass through solid matter."

As soon as the shuttle landed, Aahn dropped the exit ramp to the pavement, but he stayed in his seat. Coop stood on ramp and extended his cane, while he looked back into the shuttle. "Are you coming, Aahn?"

"Do you Earthers not fear anything?" Aahn asked as he struggled to leave his seat, which was not restraining him in any way.

"I'm terrified every step of the way on your planets!" replied Coop. "Here, I am an alien, an absolute outsider. Everything I hear and say is filtered by an imperfect universal translator. Come on," he urged. A series of lighted arrow-images in the pavement pointed the way.

"They are also the masters of logic," complained Aahn as he nervously left the ramp. "An actual welcoming committee would be too inefficient and personal!"

The arrows directed them along a path to the center column, which must have been three hundred meters in diameter. There was a wide rectangular door, which contained an emblem of the Taegellan sun. It was a large yellow-green circle, surrounded by four sets of three short parallel lines, very much like the ancient American Indian image of the sun god. Superimposed on the image of the sun were four differently sized black circles, which represented Taegella and its three moons.

The door opened automatically; it closed behind them after they had entered. They found themselves in a stark, gray corridor that had no markings. Hidden arrows in the floor gave directions and then vanished.

"I think this is an elevator shaft, but it has no cables, not even a cab," observed Coop as they stood at an open door, an entry way to a precipitous cylindrical cavity that seemed to stretch forever in both the up and the down directions. Feeling brave, Coop carefully stepped out into the void; moments later he watched Aahn, still standing at the entrance, drop from view as he was swept upwards by an invisible force.

Coop stood momentarily at the entrance to a very large, dimly lighted chamber that was filled with indistinct shadows. As Aahn joined him, two rows of tiny, parallel luminous images in the floor marked their way. Each time they

took a step forward, the chamber became better illuminated. As shutters in the ceiling gradually opened, revealing that the chamber was at the top of the city, beautiful adolescent girls drifted downwards and landed on either side of the lighted path, facing toward the path. They all wore long dresses that showed a moderate amount of cleavage and were slit up to the waist on the left-hand side. The girls to the right of Coop and Aahn wore reddish-brown dresses, while those to their left wore light-blue dresses.

"These are the Council Chambers of Quem," whispered Aahn to Coop. Coop nodded, while he continued to be fascinated by the girls.

The girls themselves were most striking, for their long hair was as black as coal, their skin was as white as snow, their vertical-pupiled eyes were a bright emerald-green, and their feet were bare of any shoes. As Coop and Aahn continued down the marked path between the two rows of girls, the girls' faces remained expressionless. Coop wondered if it was an optical illusion that those dressed in reddish-brown seemed to be taller and heavier than those dressed in light-blue.

Beyond the girls, around the perimeter of the room, they could faintly see others watching them from the shadows. Ahead was a throne consisting of three adjacent seats. The middle seat was twice the size of the other seats. In the center sat a striking woman, who wore a silver-gold dress. To her left sat a young woman, dressed in reddish-brown, and to her right sat another, dressed in light-blue.

"I ... Utash, Avatar ... Quem," began the woman; Coop and Aahn had reached the end of the lighted pathway, and stood upon an image of the Taegellan sun similar to the one on the outer entrance door. Her speech was heard by Coop in a broken set of syllables. "To ... left ... my son, Taluhn, and to ... right ... daughter, Aimli."

"I am getting an incomplete translation," Coop complained.

Aahn took Coop's universal translator and adjusted it, while he whispered to Coop, "They are too logical and precise for that setting." He placed the translator back on Coop's shirt; then he continued, "I am Prince Aahn of the Xehborans, ruler of all Taegella."

"Yes, the ruler of the barbarian wastelands, but not ruler of himself," commented Utash without inflection, but correctly translated for Coop. "Is this the *one*, who is standing next to you?"

"I have brought the Earther Lawrence Cooper to you as requested.

"Lawrence Cooper, welcome to Quem. Please step forward and raise your hand," requested Utash emotionlessly.

As Coop took a step away from Aahn, all the Quemgi clapped their hands once sharply. It was both a greeting and a sign of approval. Coop raised his right hand and thought, *'When they said they were androgynous, they weren't kidding. I can't tell the boys from the girls here! I wonder if the Quemgi can?'*

Many soft murmurs circulated through the chamber, followed by silence. Coop felt like there were a dozen spotlights trained on him, though the light around him was actually soft and pleasant. He began to sweat.

"We Quemgi lead lives based on logic and discipline," continued Utash. "Despite all our training and safeguards, we have become accomplices to a growing malignancy, who has wrought much death and suffering to her people, and notoriety and shame on my people. It should not have been possible for Kragg to access our facilities, but she did. Despite her marginal success, her powers and abilities continue to grow. Soon she shall be invincible. She might eventually come full circle and destroy us also. We are in need of a true *Tarrok* to counter her ascendancy."

Silence followed. Aahn was too nervous to speak, and Coop got tired of waiting. "A new right-handed boy has been born among you?" Coop suggested.

"Unfortunately, that has not happened," replied Utash. "In all the known nearby worlds, there are only three right-handed males who have not been transformed by Zolanda: Kragg, Dr. Zelenka, and you, Lawrence Cooper."

"Hey," protested Coop, "I can't possibly become this *Tarrok*. It was bad enough that I had to sneak around Vulcra uncomfortably disguised as a woman! Besides, there are also two problems: I am not a Taegellan, and you need a right-handed woman as part of the transformation."

"We believe that the transformation can be performed on an Earther," said Utash coldly. "We do not have a right-handed Earther female, but Aahn has brought a genetic scan of your wife, Jean, which we should be able to substitute for an actual woman."

"Excuse me," said Coop as he pulled Aahn aside, glaring at him all the time. "You're an accomplice in this insane scheme!"

Aahn shrugged his shoulders in innocence, as he softly spoke, "I swear this was not what I expected, Cooper. It is absolutely unnecessary for you to become a woman to defeat Kragg; my troops will soon overrun her best defenses!"

"What if you do not get Kragg? What if he escapes and becomes yet more powerful? I do not want to be hounded by this person for the rest of my life! Sooner or later, he is going to kill me! I also imagine it's only a matter of time before he invades the Earth!"

"Trust me," pleaded Aahn; "everything is well-planned, nothing can go wrong!"

'That's what he said last time. I knew those genetic scans were a bad idea, but I never realized they would return to haunt me. They'll play on my sense of destiny: if I think it is necessary, I will do it. Aahn always miscalculates. I'm trapped by my own rationale!' thought Coop.

"Have you reached a decision?" asked Utash, as Coop and Aahn returned to face him.

"The answer is no!" asserted Aahn. "My friend shall not subject himself to any of your gruesome rituals. We shall defeat Kragg without your black magic, which got us into this situation in the first place!"

"Just a moment, Aahn," countered Coop. "It is important to me that I make the right decision, without any pressure. All I require is time, freedom to roam your city, and one companion, Utash: your daughter."

"Your wish is granted," replied Utash, as the Quemgi again made one sharp clap of their hands.

* * *

"How many people live in your city?" asked Coop as he and Aimli strolled along a windowed corridor in the outer perimeter.

"Over sixty million," she answered without any elaboration.

"You live here because...," he began.

"Because our ancestors were despised and persecuted by the barbarian hordes of Taegella," Aimli explained. "Even before we had fully perfected our disciplined way of life, we prospered where others floundered. Eventually, we built this city over the frozen wastelands below. No one has ever claimed that land, though they have stolen from us from time to time."

"Stolen from you?" questioned Coop.

"The scientific discoveries that we developed for peaceful purposes," Aimli explained without emotion. "They waste vast amounts of great knowledge building weapons for petty bickering."

"Your people have developed beyond emotion and passion?" asked Coop curiously, finding it difficult to remember that he was talking to a young Taegellan woman.

"That is not correct," said Aimli with a small hint of emphasis. "We lead disciplined lives, but we do not exist without passion and emotions. Our logic is difficult for foreigners to comprehend."

"You did not ask why I chose you as a confident," added Coop.

"I accept that you did," replied Aimli. "It is my duty to help you; besides, you and your situation are interesting."

"Perhaps it was just that you are a very pretty girl; not a very rational explanation," said Coop, as he pondered her almost innocent attractiveness, which was balanced by her logical bearing.

"My appearance is not the reason, because we have already attained a psychic rapport," confessed Aimli. "Did you not sense me reaching out to you on Vulcra?"

"I did have some strange thoughts. Can you read my mind?"

"A person's mind cannot be read, but feelings can be sensed or inferred. You did not choose me for beauty, because here on Quem all in a given age group are equally beautiful," Aimli added.

"That I have noticed," admitted Coop. "Even your men look like beautiful women, which doesn't seem rational."

"In our species, feminine attributes promote peace and are more conducive to advanced reasoning and logic. Thousands of years ago, to evolve toward a more advanced, logical, disciplined, and contemplative existence, our ancestors introduced us to this androgynous life through forced genetic changes. In our society on Quem, beauty is not a passion; it is a merely fact of existence."

"But you have passion," suggested Coop.

"We passionately probe intuitive nature of existence. We are creative. We create concepts, ideas, and physical devices. Most are discarded when we are done, lest their materialistic aspects enslave us."

"How about reproduction...er, sex?" asked Coop cautiously.

"Do we integrate the biological imperative? Some might characterize us as being lusty, others as being nearly celibate. In truth, we are merely disciplined, but our love lives are not boring," replied Aimli with nearly no emotion. She

paused for a moment; then she changed the subject, "You have not asked about the nature of the *Tarrok*."

"Somehow," began Coop reluctantly, "I must explore this option. I think women are really great, but I had never considered being transformed into one."

"I am told that no *Tarrok* has ever sought to undertake this process at first," Aimli explained.

"How many men have gone through this transformation?" asked Coop.

"There have been three; the last was four centuries ago. Quem was built during the time of the first *Tarrok*. We colonized nearby stars during the time of the second *Tarrok*. We attained great spiritual insights and a mandate for our current culture during the time of the third *Tarrok*," said Aimli with an unspoken intensity that Coop could feel.

"And they all chose to abandon their way of life and become female instead of male!" remarked Coop with an air of consternation.

"Technically, they became women, not females," Aimli revealed. "Though the internal organs of a *Tarrok* appear to be female, they are actually male. Though a *Tarrok* cannot impregnate a woman during physical bonding, the semen can later be manually transferred from the *Tarrok*'s vagina to a real female's vagina. Historically, however, all *Tarroks* have been celibate. Unfortunately, this means that they did not have any descendants."

"Just how will I become feminized by Jean's genetic scan?" asked Coop, as he sought some obvious reason to disavow such a transformation.

"You are an Earther, so the process will be unique to your species. Our analysis indicates that you will become a new, synthesized feminine being, who will possess extraordinary strength. Your memories will remain intact, but the physiology of your wife will dominate," replied Aimli.

"Are you telling me that when I look into a mirror, I will see Jean instead of me?" asked Coop as he raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

"You might even be mistaken for her," added Aimli with a slight emphasis.

"And her clothes will fit me?" Coop wondered.

"Very likely," replied Aimli.

"Will I be able to fly?" asked Coop, trying to match Aimli's objective demeanor.

"It is a skill you should be able to learn; previous *Tarroks* have been able to levitate," said Aimli, adjusting the tone of her voice slightly.

"And I will be able to walk through walls?" suggested Coop drolly.

"You are a man...you will still be a male...only a few males develop teleport skills. For some reason, it is an ability entirely denied women," replied Aimli with a momentary rise in her voice. She did not lose her composure.

"Perhaps," suggested Coop seriously, "the way in which the skill is taught suffers from some persistent form of sexism." Aimli did not reply; she was apparently mentally processing Coop's comment.

"I do not want to be dependent on Tavik for the rest of my life!" asserted Coop.

"Tavik is needed only during the transformation; Kragg is an aberration," explained Aimli.

"What about my current infirmities, my persistent reminders of my encounter with Kragg's tremendous strength? Will they remain?" asked Coop.

"A *Tarrok* has no weakness of body...or mind," replied Aimli.

Coop was left without words for a moment. He stared out a window, gazing blankly at the rugged ice fields below the city; then he changed the subject, "How is this transformation accomplished?"

"A derivative of the narcotic Tavik is used only as a catalyst, in conjunction with a special mutation-induction field," replied Aimli.

"How is this field generated?" asked Coop, uncertain whether he really wanted to know.

"We have a device called the Tarrator. It can do many things: map genetic patterns, compare genetic patterns, repair defective genes, improve useful genes, and even perform combinative-mutational synthesis on strings of genes," explained Aimli, trying to be as precise as possible.

"It all sounds extremely painful, like being kicked in the groin," complained Coop.

"I understand that it is very pleasant; in fact, it is considered to be too pleasant, because all the historical *Tarroks* were so taken with the experience of the transformation that they forsook all ordinary pleasures for the rest of their lives!" stated Aimli with a hint of displeasure.

"Is there a place where I can wander in solitude while I think," asked Coop, as he tried to sort out the possibilities.

"We can clear the gardens near where Aahn's shuttle landed," suggested Aimli.

"If it's not too much trouble," said Coop apologetically.

"It is no trouble; take all the time you need. Remember, we are not like the barbarians of the surface world. You can trust us," Aimli assured him. Coop was not convinced.

**COOP HAS ESCAPED TO
TAEGELLA, AND ARRIVED
AT THE SKY CITY, QUEM.
MEANWHILE, DR. ZELENKA
AND VAL ARE STILL THE
PRISONERS OF EMPRESS
KRAGG IN KARIE ON THE
PLANET VULCRA....**



EIGHT A FRIEND IN THE DARKNESS

"Who are you?" asked Dr. Zelenka as he was suddenly confronted by a tall Lazarrian woman. She was wearing a brown minidress, the garb of a technician. The last thing he remembered was bickering with Kragg.

"I am Narr, a friend," she replied softly. "We must not arouse any of the guards," she warned as she showed him the mind-control headband that she had just removed from his head.

"A devilish device," grimaced Dr. Zelenka. "But you're a Lazarrian, so why should you help me?"

"Appearances can be misleading," she explained as she removed a component from the headband and replaced it with another. "I am not a Lazarrian or even a female, but an agent of Prince Aahn, and I have disabled the headband. You must continue to wear it, to deceive Kragg and her guards."

"Why...are you doing this for me? And what about Val and Coop?" asked Dr. Zelenka suspiciously.

"We need your help in our preparations for the assault on this city. As for your woman friend, Kragg keeps that area too heavily guarded for me to reach her."

"And, what of my other friend: Lawrence Cooper?"

"He has proven to be too elusive for Kragg, waging constant guerrilla warfare throughout this planet. He is extremely resourceful for an off-world alien," emphasized Narr with an air of admiration.

"That sounds like Coop," said Dr. Zelenka as he tried to grasp the current situation. "But I do not understand how I can help you."

"Once a week you assist the engineers in servicing weapons systems, especially Kragg's synthoids. We want you to devise a way to neutralize these synthoids early during our assault," explained Narr.

"That should not be difficult," said Dr. Zelenka after he took a moment to think about how the synthoids were constructed. He could not remember events while he was wearing the mind-control headband, but he had been able to remember the facts that the engineers had given him for servicing the units.

"We also need to know the layout of the master command center for the city's weapons and shields. Remember, you must take care not to reveal that you are now conscious!" warned Narr. "You will need to help neutralize all the turret guns, and control the access to small weapons armories. Armories closest to you need to be accessible by our invading forces, while all others need to be locked down."

"I think I can do that, and more," said Dr. Zelenka with a smile.

"Do not attempt to do any more than that, and do not take any offensive action yourself in the master command center," urged Narr. "It is vital that the synthoids and turrets be disabled and the armory access be controlled, so that should be your *only* personal objective. Here is the attack frequency that will be the trigger."

Dr. Zelenka was about to emphasize that he was not up to doing any more, but Narr left as abruptly as she had appeared. Dr. Zelenka returned to his laboratory. This time he was fully-conscious. He selected four new control cards to program. Something had changed; it was wondrous! Now when he looked at Taegellan devices, their inner workings seem clearer than ever before. It was like an epiphany. It was more than he could ever have hoped for.

'If I turn off any attack circuits, they might detect that,' he realized. 'However, if I make the synthoids target each other, it will be undetectable until it happens. I can do the same with the turrets, by forcing them to target only Kragg's ships.'

Dr. Zelenka reprogrammed the replacement control cards. The synthoids and turrets would function normally until they received the attack frequency; then they would seek out and destroy their own forces.



***COOP AND AHN HAVE GONE
TO THE SKY CITY OF THE
QUEM, WHO HAVE OFFERED
MAKE COOP INVINCIBLE
AGAINST EMPRESS KRAGG.
COOP ONLY HAS TO UNDERGO
THE TRANSFORMATION TO A
TARROK, THE TAEGELLAN
SUPER WOMAN, BUT....***



NINE: TRANSFORMATION

"Cooper, you simply cannot undergo this process!" complained Aahn as he and Coop reentered the Quem Council Chamber. "When I brought you here, I thought they were going to ally themselves with us against Kragg. I wondered why they wanted your genetic scans. Their culture is too weird, and their help too diabolical!"

"I will not change my mind," Coop emphasized. "I misjudged Kragg once, and she maimed me and killed Jean. I do not doubt that you will crush his forces, but my intuition tells me that she will escape."

"Cooper, we will win, and Kragg and her sister will be captured or will die. It is simple; there will be no mistakes this time!"

"I had not even thought about Zolanda," added Coop. "How are you going to combat her powers of magic?"

"Zolanda will be defeated by the power of the black sapphire of the Teeli, which counteracts the power of her crimson sapphire," answered Aahn proudly."

"I didn't know this," admitted Coop. "The Teeli are loaning you this jewel?"

"Not exactly," replied Aahn in an evasively.

"I know you're going to steal it from them!" said Coop disgustedly. "I think you *already* stole it."

"I always do what is necessary," said Aahn with determination. "They will not loan me the jewel, because the two sapphires must be placed together and

destroyed, to undo what Zolanda has wrought. See, I have thought of everything. Trust me, Cooper!"

"I shall trust you, but in the likeness of Jean, not Lawrence Cooper. I've been despondent for years. I will quite literally do anything to bring Jean back and defeat Kragg. I've made my decision. We all will have to live with it."

Aahn winced and shook his head, but he became uncharacteristically quiet as they approached Utash, sitting alone at his throne. All the pretty adolescent boys and girls were absent, as well as Aimli and Taluhn. The chamber, while not brilliantly lighted, was much better illuminated than before. Coop could see the Council of Quem, seated on either side of Utash on concentric rows of austere uncomfortable-looking, curving benches.

"You have reached your decision," spoke Utash in a matter-of-fact tone.

"I will undergo this transformation. I do this not for myself, but for all my friends on both sides of the galaxy."

After the Quemgi gave their single, sharp clap of approval, Aahn protested, as he tugged at Coop's right arm, "Come back to Xehbora with me. Forget this insane idea of the Quemgi!"

"I am committed," Coop asserted. "Extraordinarily good luck got me this far, but I will need more than luck to defeat Kragg."

"You must leave Quem now," ordered Utash without anger, pointing Aahn. "We will recall you back when we are ready."

* * *

Coop wondered what plain rooms were like on Quem, for, at first glance, his guest suit contained nothing more than a bed, a brown robe, a white towel on the bed, and a small bathroom in a side closet. Coop lay down on the bed. He was tired, but he was too restless to sleep or to remain in one position, as he continued to debate his decision in his mind. Tomorrow, he would undergo a transformation that would literally change him for the rest of his life.

Coop decided he would attempt to figure out the shower. He wished that he could get his clothing cleaned; then he realized the availability of laundry service was academic. Soon, the clothing he had worn from Earth would no longer fit him.

Having completed the shower, he wondered what the towel was for, since the misty shower had not involved the use of any liquids whatsoever. When he emerged to face Aimli standing next to the bed, he quickly wrapped the towel around his waist; then he grabbed the universal translator.

"So this is what the towel is for," said Coop annoyedly. "I do not think it is proper for you to be here unannounced, even on Quem."

"I do not know your customs," Aimli explained. "We are reserved, but not shy. If you are willing, I am here to offer you a mate for the night...your last night as a complete male."

"That isn't possible, is it?" Coop asked nervously. He already knew that he found her attractive.

"Our species are not biologically compatible, but we do seem to be sexually compatible. I am sorry that we have no Earther female as a mate for you."

"I don't think I can do this; I haven't had sex since Jean...."

"This is what the towel is for," she announced as she let her dress fall to the floor; then she slung the towel around Coop's buttocks and pulled Coop forward. Coop tossed his translator onto the bed. Since Aimli's translator had fallen to the floor with her dress, neither could now understand the other; however, it no longer mattered, since they spoke the language of passion into the night.

* * *

Coop wore only the brown robe he had been given as he accompanied several Quemgi down one of the cabless elevators to a special laboratory in the lower hemisphere. Utash, Aimli, and Taluhn had given him a ten-minute briefing,

but now they only offered a perfunctory greeting. Aimli pointed to burns in one wall, caused by Kragg when he had forced his way in with a disrupter.

Technicians were waiting for him. They gave him a small amount of highly-refined Tavik to drink; then they led him to a laboratory door opened to a spherical chamber. In the center of the chamber was the Tarrator, a dark sphere that looked like a pincushion, because it was covered by several contoured components that resembled cones where they attached to the sphere, which narrowed into rod-like projections from the sphere. Several spherical shells, composed of alternating empty and filled ceramic panels, surrounded the inner sphere. Four separate walkways pierced the shells at empty panel locations and intersected at the inner sphere.

Utash, Aimli, and Taluhn watched without emotion as two of the technicians led Coop down the nearest walkway to the inner sphere. There was no door; the sphere split apart to create an entrance to its dark interior. Abruptly stripped of his robe and translator disk, Coop stood alone and naked as the segments of the Tarrator rejoined and sealed. A faint, welcome amber glow accompanied the loss of gravity. The last remnants of the walkway folded into the side of the wall as Coop drifted toward the center.

'I don't feel particularly anxious or nervous; it must be the effect of the Tavik and the tranquilizing field. There's no turning back now!' thought Coop.

In the distance, some kind of apparatus began to hum. Coop could feel a series of pressure waves pass by him; he assumed that the process had begun. He tried to concentrate, but even his currently indistinct surrounding began to blur. Soon, he was not sure whether he was conscious or dreaming, as all his normal senses had become distorted. Unexpected images appeared. They were very confusing, until he realized what he was seeing.

'The genetic scan recorded selections from Jean's memory. I'm seeing some of her oldest memories. This is weird, because I think I am going to relive bits of her life!' he thought.

Jean's memories were surrealistic, a subtle blend of sight and sound, but filtered by her mind. The images seemed endless, as Coop watched Jean's view of the world from childhood to adolescence. She went on to college and then got a job in graphics design. Then a cousin of Dr. Zelenka introduced her to a young, reckless aviator named Lawrence Cooper. Some of the later images became extraordinarily intense and nostalgic, as they became lovers and set up house-keeping together, eventually getting married.

Coop began to lose his concentration during the final set of images, which were those after their abduction to Taegella. The final memory of Jean getting her genetic scan arrived. That genetic scan itself was an especially intense image that trailed off into blackness as Coop lost consciousness.

* * *

Coop felt great when he awoke. He could not recall ever having had such a pleasant, relaxed sleep. The room was dark; he was confused and lost. He imagined for a moment that he was home in bed, so he rolled over while he searched for the familiar lamp next to the bed. He noticed the odd, lumpy feeling in his chest.

The room lights snapped on in response to his movement. Instantly he recalled that he was in a room of the sky city of Quem. The robe he wore was loose-fitting, but it showed enough of his figure to reveal that he not only felt different, he also looked different. Before confronting the mirror, in one fairly smooth motion, he ran his hands down his body, from the top of his head to the tips of his toes. His hair felt much finer and the skin of his face and neck was baby smooth. His breasts were firm when he pressed on them, but floppy when he released them. The motion of his hands down his sides to the much-narrower

waist, on to the new curves in his hips and thighs, was almost sensuous. The muscles in his legs were more delicate, and his feet were obviously smaller.

When he stood up again, his hands immediately explored his rearranged crotch. All the sagging weight had been replaced with a fairly flat surface and a few unfamiliar folds of skin. Curiosity now demanded that he look into the nearby mirror.

He had fully expected to see Jean, but the effect was still overwhelming. Except for the shortness of his blond hair, he looked exactly like he remembered her. Tears streaked down his feminine cheeks. He was shocked when the reflection in the mirror spoke with a sonorous woman's voice, "Hello Coop, I'm back from the dead. We are now one in mind and body." He knew what he had just said, but he was not sure whether it had been voluntary.

There was a brief knock at the door; then he turned to see Aimli enter the room, carrying a small bundle under her left arm. She stood in place for a moment, as she observed his new appearance. "A signal indicated you were awake, so I came to see. Excuse me for staring, but I have never seen a transformed *Tarrok* before."

"I look anatomically like a human female," said Coop disappointedly as he let the robe drop to the floor. "Traces of Jean's thoughts flicker through my mind. I even fancy myself going through her closet to try on her favorite outfits. I think something went awry, that I have actually been changed in Jean, and that her thought patterns might even grow to dominate."

"The transformation was successful," asserted Aimli with a slight emphasis. "You've experienced a form of memory merging."

Coop paused for a second, as he realized that Aimli's speech had become much clearer. He looked down at the floor at the robe, to which the universal translator was attached. "I seem to speak your dialect of Taekbulgi fluently now," he calmly observed.

"It is a measure of the success of the transformation. You were instilled not only with you wife's thought patterns, but also some of those of past *Tarroks*."

"Where is all the fantastic strength?" he asked as he flexed the muscles in his feminine arms. "I have no pectoral muscles and only puny arm and leg muscles. I make a pretty girl, but I don't think I can take on Kragg!"


"Can you bend this?" asked Aimli as she handed him a small metal rod.

"Is this a joke?" he asked as he flexed the springy rod several times with scarcely any effort.

"Except for Kragg, no one else can do that," she explained. "You are indeed a *Tarrok*, and I have brought you your new clothing." Aimli unfolded a silver-gold dress along with an unusual style of bra and panties. The light undergarments had a super-fine weave and an unexpectedly resilient elasticity.

"What can I say; besides that I swore I would never wear a dress again," commented Coop as he turned from side to side in front of the mirror. "It fits me just like some fairy tale princess; however, this is not exactly what Jean would have wanted to wear. I think I am going to have to develop a more suitable wardrobe. What happens next?"

"Initiation and training, to become a *Tarrok* in mind and body," answered Aimli. "You must be properly prepared for your new skills, your new life, even your new name."



*COOP HAS BEEN AWAY, BUT
THE ALLIES NEED A PLAN
TO INVADE VULCRA, YET
DISORDER PREVAILS
AND EVERYONE IS
ABOUT TO MEET
LARRA....*



TEN ASSAULT ON VULCRA



Aahn and Telanna had assembled the allied leaders of Taegella around a conference table at the capitol city of the Teeli, while they awaited the arrival of the Quemgi. Aahn wore his royal green dress uniform. Telanna wore the flashy dress uniform of female Relkash royalty: an amber dress with golden metal plates around her chest and black, vertical strips of metal on the knee-length skirt. Her orange boots came up to her knees and were covered with short, silver-colored spikes. A leather-like barrette, pierced by a small black dagger, shaped her hair into a ponytail.

There was much grumbling among the allied leaders. They all feared the Quemgi, and they all resented Aahn's many abuses of power.

"The sacred black sapphire has been stolen!" cried the Teeli delegate.
"Rumor has it that it was that it was one of your agents, Aahn!"

"We are not here to discuss petty theft, but to map out strategy!" protested Aahn as he changed the subject. "The attack against Kragg should be foremost in your...."

Aahn stopped speaking when he realized that the room had gone silent. Everyone stared in one direction, as the Quemgi delegation entered the conference room. Many delegates left their chairs and moved to the distant walls or doorways.

"Welcome," said Aahn insincerely, as he searched in vain for Utash. His social upbringing made it difficult for him to treat these people, men who looked like women and the women who had come with them, as equals.

"Pardon the manners of my patriarchal husband," apologized Telanna, who was perfectly at ease. "Utash is not coming?"

"My father will be here within seconds," replied Taluhn. His sister Aimli stood next to him.

Utash materialized in front of Aahn and Telanna without warning. He wore a bright silver dress, which bore the yellow-green Quemgi image of the Taegellan sun below his breasts. Aahn stepped back while holding his hands in a defensive pushing motion, but Telanna did not flinch.

"I am here to offer our help," announced Utash, not wasting any words.

"How can I trust one who would inflict their evil mystic arts upon my friend Cooper," countered Aahn.

Utash raised his hand; then the Quemgi split into two files, as an Earther woman with long blond hair confidently emerged from among them. She was not dressed as the Quemgi, nor was she dressed as anyone else in the room. She wore a light-brown, Earth-style dress that had a wide black belt and a moderately narrow skirt, with a back walking slit in the hemline that did not quite reach her knees. She wore dark brown boots with short, pointed heels that enclosed her

bare legs almost all the way to her knees. She also wore a man-tailored jacket that was somewhat reminiscent of a flight jacket.

Silence pervaded the conference room. Aahn seemed to turn pale.

"Jean...no, she is dead!" he blurted in disbelief. "Cooper! What have they done to you?"

"I am neither Jean DeLong, nor Lawrence Cooper, but a complex synthesis of the two," she announced with a bounce in her voice. "I have taken the new name: Larra. It has an exotic taste to it, like this outfit. I have no regrets; I've become totally accustomed to my new persona, and all the nuances that go with her."

"A tremendous improvement," complemented Telanna, who did not share her husband's trepidation. She firmly embraced Larra, which tacitly signaled that she considered Larra equal to any Relkash woman.

"I need transportation to Vulcra," Larra explained, "so I can gain access to the citadel before your troops arrive. I plan to help your people who are already in place take over the control room and eliminate the shields and weapons systems," she added confidently.

"Alone?" questioned Aahn, indicating that he still thought of her as a puny woman.

"Yes," demonstrated Larra as she swiftly grabbed Aahn, tossed him a couple of meters into the air, and then caught him on the way down. With an expression of wonder in his eyes, Aahn motioned to his guards to keep their place.

"Not alone; Taluhn and Aimli will accompany you. They will assist you, as your skills continue to develop," interjected Utash without emotion.

"They're your children, Utash," objected Larra sadly.

"I willingly bear their potential sacrifice in the effort to stop Kragg. They volunteered; they do not know fear," added Utash, showing a touch of pride.

"So it shall be!" cried Aahn, as he forcibly regained his composure, fearing that he would lose face if he did not seize control of the conference and heighten the enthusiasm for the coming battle. "As soon as we finalize our strategy here, I will send you three off to Vulcra on my fastest ship; then a null-ship will drop you within sight of Karie!"

* * *

The Vulcran day was two hours old as the three of them approached Karie. It was the best time of the day to invade the Western pleasure quarters, where Val was being held, because there would be a minimum number of guards and attendants processing to their incarcerated charges. Taluhn and Aimli looked every bit like two of Kragg's servant women, wearing matching green minidresses and sandals, as they escorted Larra toward the entrance to the city. They had tinted their pale skin a pastel red to pass as Lazarrians. They had also cut their long black hair and replaced it with reddish-brown wigs.

Larra wore a yellow minidress and lace-up yellow sandals. She concentrated to develop the mindset and walk of an Earther captive, so that none would realize that the mind-control headband she wore had been disabled. "These flimsy girls' clothes are not exactly fighting outfits!" she complained softly.

"Their lack of restriction will be more useful than sturdier clothing. Remember to maintain proper concentration," warned Taluhn.

"Besides, this is the easiest way to gain entrance to the city without arousing suspicion," added Aimli.

Larra concentrated to stare ahead as blankly as possible, as two *Zarg* guards interrogated Taluhn and Aimli. Though the Quemgi spoke with slight accents, the guards did not think it was unusual, because the prevalence of dialects was high on Vulcra.

There were few entry restrictions within the city. There were minor restriction for reaching the laboratories, and major restrictions for entering the area of the command center. The plan was to visit the guard's pleasure quarters first, where Val and other Earthers were being held. Then they would move on to the laboratory, and finally the command center.

"She's a pretty one," said a passing *Zarg* guard, "but I am not high enough in rank to possess her!"

When they reached a checkpoint to the pleasure quarters, the lone guard made the mistake of placing a hand on one of Larra's breasts. In a blinding motion, she knocked him cold. Aimli and Taluhn used a tiny syringe to inject him with a sleeping drug; then they bound him with thread that was so thin that it was nearly invisible. While Aimli and Taluhn placed the guard in a closet, Larra unfolded a bag and stored his disrupter inside.

Larra stared at the far end of the corridor as she approached a *Bozarg* guard armed with a turbo-disrupter. As she passed, the guard grunted at her. She hit him so hard that his body dented the wall.

Two more *Zarg* guards, three more *Bozarg* guards, and five Lazarrian women attendants were disabled before the pleasure quarters had been secured. Using a set of electronic keys, the three of them set about opening the many filthy, unsanitary cells, some of which housed many transformed Earthers. While Taluhn and Aimli liberated the Earthers, Larra searched for Val.

Val lunged at Larra when she removed the mind-control headband, but Larra was faster, holding her in place with an iron grip. "Easy, I'm a friend!" Larra warned.

"Oh, you almost crushed one of my wrists," complained Val. "What happened? How did I get into this...ridiculous-looking yellow dress?"

"I'm from the Earth too, Valerie. While you're being used as bait, Kragg has also put you to work as a pleasure maid, as in guards and sex," explained Larra.

"Those disgusting pigs! Wait until...."

"Come," Larra commanded; "we must assemble our forces. Here, put this disabled headband back on. They tend to ignore you here if you look like a harmless girl!"

Taluhn and Aimli had already assembled the others in a dining area when Larra and Val arrived. Val was still trying to figure out what was happening. She had already noticed that there were no men to be seen, and that she found Larra attractive.

"Val, meet Taluhn and Aimli from Quem. This is Val, she came on the ship with Dr. Zelenka and I," Larra explained.

"I wondered how you knew my name," said Val weakly with an incredible expression. She was about to say something else, but she was interrupted.

"My name is Mason. Appearances to the contrary, I used to be a marine," announced one of the transformed Earthers.

"Good," replied Larra; "as soon as we break into the guards' armory, you can supervise arming the others. You will be instructed how to use a disrupter. Remember, do not release the safety until you are ready to use one, or an alarm might sound!"

Everyone was cautioned to maintain as blank an expression as possible, as Taluhn and Aimli led their unlikely troop of more than eighty women toward the nearest armory. Val fought to keep a straight face, to keep from laughing at the absurdity of the situation.

* * *

With their weapons hidden in bags slung over their shoulders, they brazenly marched past many guard stations toward the laboratory, using the ruse that

Kragg had ordered to see them, to select victims for her fatal embrace. Only two more guard stations lay between them and the command center of the city.

Larra noticed that Val often paused once every few minutes to sneak a glance her way. Using her new intuitive powers, Larra began to predict when Val would do it. When Val realized that Larra was onto her, she did not stop doing it; she merely smiled and began to sneak glances more randomly.

"What is the meaning of this!" protested Grath, Kragg's chief scientist as he and his associates found themselves facing the barrels of dozens of disrupters.

"Service women and pleasure maids are not allowed to carry guns!"

"Where are Narr and Dr. Zelenka?" demanded Larra.

"We are here," Narr replied as she left a storage closet, pulling Dr. Zelenka along with her.

"Frank, are you okay?" asked Val as she put her hand on his shoulder, as Taluhn and Aimli instructed the other Earthers to bind the scientists and to put them to sleep.

"I was wondering the same about you. Have you heard anything of Coop; and who are all these women?" asked Dr. Zelenka as his eyes confusedly searched through the crowd. Then he spied Larra, and his heart nearly stopped. "Jean, is that really you?"

"Jean is dead, and Coop is gone. I am Larra now! The details will have to come later. Doc, did you take care of the synthoids?"

Confused, but sensing that she was in charge, Dr. Zelenka replied, "After the fighting begins, the mechanical beasts will not last long."

"We are done. The attack will have begun by the time we reach the control center!" Aimli informed them.

* * *

The two battle platforms and four dreadnoughts were the first to appear, followed by hundreds of spaceships. All radiated from a single location: the

termination area of the matter bridge from Taegella. In the first minutes of battle, nearly half of Kragg's new fleet was destroyed or disabled.

The alarm had barely sounded in Karie, as a wave of spaceships bombed the airfield near the city, before any strato-cruisers stationed there could take off. Since the city's nearly-impenetrable defense system was still fully operational, some spaceships moved to other targets on Vulcra, while others landed troops in preparation for the assault on the city itself.

* * *

The alarm sounded as they finished taking out the next-to-the-last guard station between them and the command center. The action had been necessary, since it would have been difficult to sneak Dr. Zelenka past the guards. Larra had not thought it possible to disguise him as a woman.

"They will probably shoot us on sight," warned Larra softly. "Get your weapons and arm them. Don't be afraid to shoot first. Some of you may or may not previously have been women, but now we are all fighting ladies from hell!"

Val and Taluhn took the lead, as they followed Dr. Zelenka's verbal instructions. They destroyed all intruder scanners in the walls, ceiling, and floor before they passed by them. They also fused the mechanisms of all the anti-penetration doors that they encountered, to prevent them from closing.

Several *Bozarg* guards burst from a hidden door, their turbo-disrupters already blasting away! Larra sped to counter their attack, and Val, Taluhn, and Aimli moved nearly as fast. Within seconds the *Bozarg* were all dead, but they had already done their damage. Two ex-pleasure maids were dead, while a third had been mortally wounded.

"I'm so sorry!" cried Larra tearfully as she held the dying woman's head.

"So far from home!" she gasped. "Just remember me; I used to be called Richard Long, from Dayton Ohio! I'll never see my...." Larra closed her eyes.

The bodice of Larra's minidress had been torn in the scuffle. Since she had not been born a female, she felt no embarrassment that she might be showing too much of her left breast.

"This is a maintenance passageway!" announced Dr. Zelenka, as he looked through the door that had opened in the wall. "It leads to the command center too, bypassing the guard station, and it contains many key city fiber optic circuits!"

"We can't even stop to mourn them," sighed Larra. "Come, hurry!" she commanded as she entered the passageway first.

When they reached the entrance to the command center, they waited for Dr. Zelenka to run a circuit comparison on his pocket analyzer, which he had stolen from the laboratory. "This bundle is the junction for the control of the outer perimeter shields and weapons systems. Blast it here and here," he pointed at two places a meter apart, "to prevent the auto-fabrication circuits from repairing the break!"

As the circuit junction was being destroyed, Val was the first through the door. Riding an adrenalin surge, she forged a path through the center with blasts from her turbo-disrupter. When she saw Kragg, she fired several direct hits, but they were without effect; Kragg had become immune to small arms fire. When Kragg moved her way, Val withdrew, knowing that she was outmatched.

The ex-pleasure maid named Mason charged forward, firing at Kragg all the way. She was determined to get Kragg.

"No!" cried Val. "Turn back; she'll kill...."

Before Val could complete her sentence, Kragg charged and intercepted Mason. She grabbed the disrupter from Mason's hand and used it to kill her.

Taluhn leaped forward, knocking the weapon from Kragg's hand; Aimli joined him in the attack. The pair was almost a match for Kragg: kicking, hitting, and dodging in unified response to her every move. Kragg was clearly frustrated and angry. In a swift motion, Kragg pulled her dagger and stabbed Taluhn in the

side. Her next thrust was meant to finish him, but Taluhn was able to teleport to safety.

As he vanished, Taluhn urged Aimli to flee, but she was barely able to respond to Kragg's next motion. She caught the dagger between her hands, not more than two centimeters from her throat. Using the power of concentration, she was able to keep it there, stalemating Kragg in place. Again, Kragg grew extremely frustrated and angry. Realizing that hypnosis was ineffectual, Kragg resolved to keep applying brute force, because Aimli could not hold her stance for much longer.

As the remaining forces in the center were subdued, Larra directed her attention toward Kragg. Running swiftly, she removed her headband and threw it at Kragg. It hit an obstruction and shattered into many flying pieces, two of which struck Kragg.

Realizing that Kragg was distracted, Aimli released the dagger, which continued on a downward arc until Kragg stabbed herself in her right thigh. As she removed the dagger, she angrily looked at Larra and shouted in a low pitch, "Jean DeLong, I thought I killed you!"

"Not this time, Kragg!" Larra replied as she swiftly ran toward Kragg.

Kragg did not wait; she exited the center through the nearest door and vanished down the corridor.

"Aimli, Val: help secure this area. Doc, take down the remaining defenses. I'm going after Kragg!" yelled Larra as she grabbed a turbo-disrupter and took pursuit.

* * *

The allied forces had already breached the outer perimeter as Zolanda followed a contingent of *Zarg* and *Bozarg* guards to their battle stations. Since the city's shields and weapons were nonfunctional, and since she had been unable to reach Kragg, Zolanda confidently decided to handle the situation herself. They

passed the smoldering wreckage of a synthoid, which had been destroyed by another synthoid. Below, dozens of mobile disrupter cannons, suspended upon repello fields, moved toward them.

"We cannot fight them," complained a *Zarg* guard; "they are too heavily shielded."

"Stand back!" commanded Zolanda, as one of her strato-cruisers from a distant airfield, trailing a plume of smoke, crashed to the ground in a nearby forest. "I will deal with them like this," she added as she touched the crimson sapphire and pointed the companion sapphire ring while reciting a manta.

The motion of the cannons did not change at first. Then they began to veer erratically and to crash to a halt. The troopers inside tried to flee, as they changed spontaneously into a protoplasmic liquid that flowed from their uniforms onto the steps and inlaid stones of the courtyards.

"This is my special treat for all!" screamed Zolanda gleefully as she prepared to transform the troopers on foot, who had been following the cannons. "Soon all Aahn's forces shall be transformed! They will merge into a river of the vanquished, which will flow to the dictates of gravity!"

Zolanda was too involved to notice troopers overhead, using flight packs to approach her from the sky. Suddenly, Aahn and two of his commanders landed next to her. Her guards were all slain the moment they landed.

"Aahn! I have a surprise for you!" she cried as she pointed the ring at him and recited a mantra. Nothing happened, so she recited the mantra again, and again.

Clutching the black sapphire, Aahn grabbed Zolanda's dagger and tossed it to one of his commanders; then he broke the golden chain and ripped the crimson sapphire from her chest.

"Witch, your powers are finished!" he said bitterly, as he placed the two stones together and prepared to destroy them. "I may have a flawed character, but I do know the meaning of balancing one's accounts!"

"No! No!" she cried as she began to flee, but she stopped and struggled to get the ring off her finger. "Kragg, save me!" she yelled when she heard the fateful blast of Aahn's disrupter. A glowing blue aura emanated from the ring and engulfed Zolanda, consuming her within seconds. Zolanda's empty clothing fell to the stone pavement.

LARRA MUST CHASE KRAGG
INTO THE CATACOMBS
KRAGG'S HOME TURF
WHERE THE DEADLY
SCAMATAR LURKS...





ELEVEN KRAGG VERSUS LARRA

Larra could only hear Kragg's footsteps, as she followed her nemesis down a curving passageway, a spiraling corridor deep beneath the city. Kragg's wound was no longer bleeding; it had been at least two minutes since Larra had seen any pink blood on the floor. The footsteps were replaced by a sharp clang. Larra confronted a square armored door at the end of the passageway, a door that had just closed.

'It's not locked.' she thought as she turned the latch. Fearing a trap, she stepped back and blasted the door with the disrupter. Some kind of high voltage electric field melted the door, as well as part of the surrounding frame.

Larra ran through the opening into a huge chamber. It had the look of an arena. Overly contrasted, blinding lights in the lofty ceiling made the central floor area as bright as day and made Kragg look like a strangely-shaped black object in the distance; however, the a shadowy perimeter made it difficult to see anything away from the central floor.

Sharp spikes, instantly recognizable as one of Kragg's tricks, began to spring randomly from the floor. *'Girls have all the fun?'* questioned Larra as she easily dodged or blasted them. She had not previously realized how fast her reflexes and acute her thought process had become. While she concentrated on the peril from the floor, she was aware of a bulky door opening, followed by heavy footsteps. She picked a spot where the spikes had been blasted away, before she stopped to look.

'Well, *this must be the skamatar,*' she thought, as she bent down to tighten the straps on her sandals. '*It's sure ugly, and it's coming my way! The upper arms with claws are a nice touch.*'

More lights turned on in the direction toward which Kragg had fled. Larra could see a platform, on which a spaceship rested in its cradle. There was tunnel leading to a launching tube in front of the cradle. It was Kragg's secret escape route to the surface.

"I do not know who you are, but my *skamatar* will make short work of you," boasted Kragg in a hollow voice that echoed through the chamber. "I will enjoy watching you die!"

Larra resolved not to let Kragg intimidate her; she had to deal with the *skamatar* first. It was about three and a half meters high. It was something like a giant ape, but with horns on its head. It had four large black eyes, arranged horizontally near the top of its head. Its jaws had an enormous vertical travel and were filled with teeth that looked like long black needles. It had four arms, two on each side, and one above the other. The upper arms had the sinister claws. The lower arms contained hands. The feet had nasty-looking claws.

The creature was coming at her, but its speed was regulated by the pace at which Kragg could retract the spikes in its path. Larra adjusted her weapon; then she made a dash around the creature, attempting to fuse exposed spikes in place, so they could not be retracted. Kragg tried to confound her by raising more spikes in her path, but Larra still managed to dodge them, by continually dashing in and out of areas of the floor where there were dark blast marks. These areas were safe havens where the spikes had been destroyed.

A blast from another disrupter blackened some of the creature's hide, which was covered with heavy, armored hairs. Val had arrived. She fired twice more without any effect.

"Take care," warned Larra; "the floor is laden with hidden spikes controlled by Kragg. Only the areas scorched by my disrupter are safe!"

"All the transformed people switched back to human beings, when Zolanda's sapphire was destroyed," said Val, as Larra switched her attention back to the *skamatar*. It was still moving forward by bending some of the spikes. Larra readjusted the weapon to maximum power and moved closer. She fired, aiming directly at one of its feet. Its body armor smoked, and the floor around the foot turned red-hot. As it gave an ear-splitting screech, it swung the sickle-like claw of one of its lower arms at her. Larra ducked, but she heard the swish and felt the rush of air. She could also smell the air; the creature had a putrid odor, like that of rotting flesh.

"The people are in good health?" asked Larra, without taking her eyes from the *skamatar*.

"Yes, mostly," said Val, as she had arrived at the other side of the creature and targeted the other foot. As the animal became enraged, it took raised its smoking foot and lunged at Larra, impaling its foot on two spikes. It pulled so hard to free its foot that it lost its balance and fell backwards onto several other spikes. It continued to bellow, but it could not free itself.

"They always fall for a pretty girl in a yellow minidress," joked Val.

"But there was a problem," sensed Larra.

"The former men are still women. The reverse transformation was not entirely reciprocal."

"I know how they feel!" replied Larra.

"Look, Kragg is climbing that platform! Is that a ship?" asked Val.

"It's his escape route. I've got to stop him!" yelled Larra as she sprinted across the floor. Val followed her.

Once Larra had ascended the stairs to the platform, she discovered that the hatch had already closed and the small spaceship was starting to hum. When the

hydraulic pumps began to move the restraints on the cradle, Larra fired her disrupter sequentially as she searched for the cradle's interface control unit. Finally, she hit her target. The resultant electrical short silenced the cradle's mechanism.

Larra aimed at the locking mechanism on hatch, but the blast was deflected by the spaceship's shield. While she pondered her next move, Val readied her disrupter and ran toward the tunnel entrance. Once she had blasted away the metal covering, the rock surrounding the tunnel entrance was exposed. Pieces of rock began to crash to the floor.

Suddenly, Kragg dashed from the opposite side of the spaceship toward Val. Val jumped from the platform onto a wide ledge that rimmed part of the chamber. She ran as fast as possible, but she quickly reached a gap too wide to jump. She was too high above the chamber floor to leap downward, even if she could survive the array of protruding spikes. She blasted away with her disrupter, knowing that it would not stop Kragg.

Larra was already in fast pursuit. While she watched, Kragg knocked the disrupter from Val's hand. Then Kragg drew her dagger, while she held Val in an unbreakable grip. *'I must go faster!'* Larra urged herself, as she remembered Jean's fatal embrace. Suddenly, she began to move at least eight steps of distance for every physical step taken.

"Now she die...."began Kragg. As her dagger plunged downwards, she watched Larra become a moving blur.

Larra knocked the dagger from Kragg's hand and pulled Val free from her grip. In the same motion, Larra kicked Kragg hard enough to physically lift her into the air and slam her against the chamber wall. As Kragg slid down the wall, Larra kicked her again, directly in the ribs, before her feet even touched the ledge.

"I'm here, Kragg!" Larra angrily said the obvious, as, below them, the dying *skamatar* bellowed its last cries. "How does it feel to have cracked ribs? Jean is

dead! You still want to kill Lawrence Cooper, to suck the life from his feminized body? Well, here she is!"

"You've been to Quem!" shouted Kragg as she thrust her hands around Larra's throat with a burst of speed. Combining her inner anger with the concentrative power of a *Tarrok* and basic martial arts skills, Larra cupped her hands and thrust her arms upwards, breaking Kragg's grip. In anticipation of Kragg's charge, Larra repositioned herself, with her back to the wall, so fast that there seemed to be two of her for a moment. A double leg kick sent Kragg flying several meters over the chamber floor, over random clusters of her own lethal spikes. Kragg strained to levitate, but it was an art she had never mastered. She stopped her motion and hovered for a moment, and then she fell. She was impaled on spikes that she would have missed, had she not tried to control her motion.

Tears streaked down Larra's cheeks, as she stared at her fallen adversary. It was not that Kragg's death saddened her, but that it was a vivid reminder of the fate of her beloved Jean.

"You were wonderful!" cried Val as she joyfully wrapped her arms around Larra. "What a woman!" she added as she gave Larra a passionate kiss on her lips.

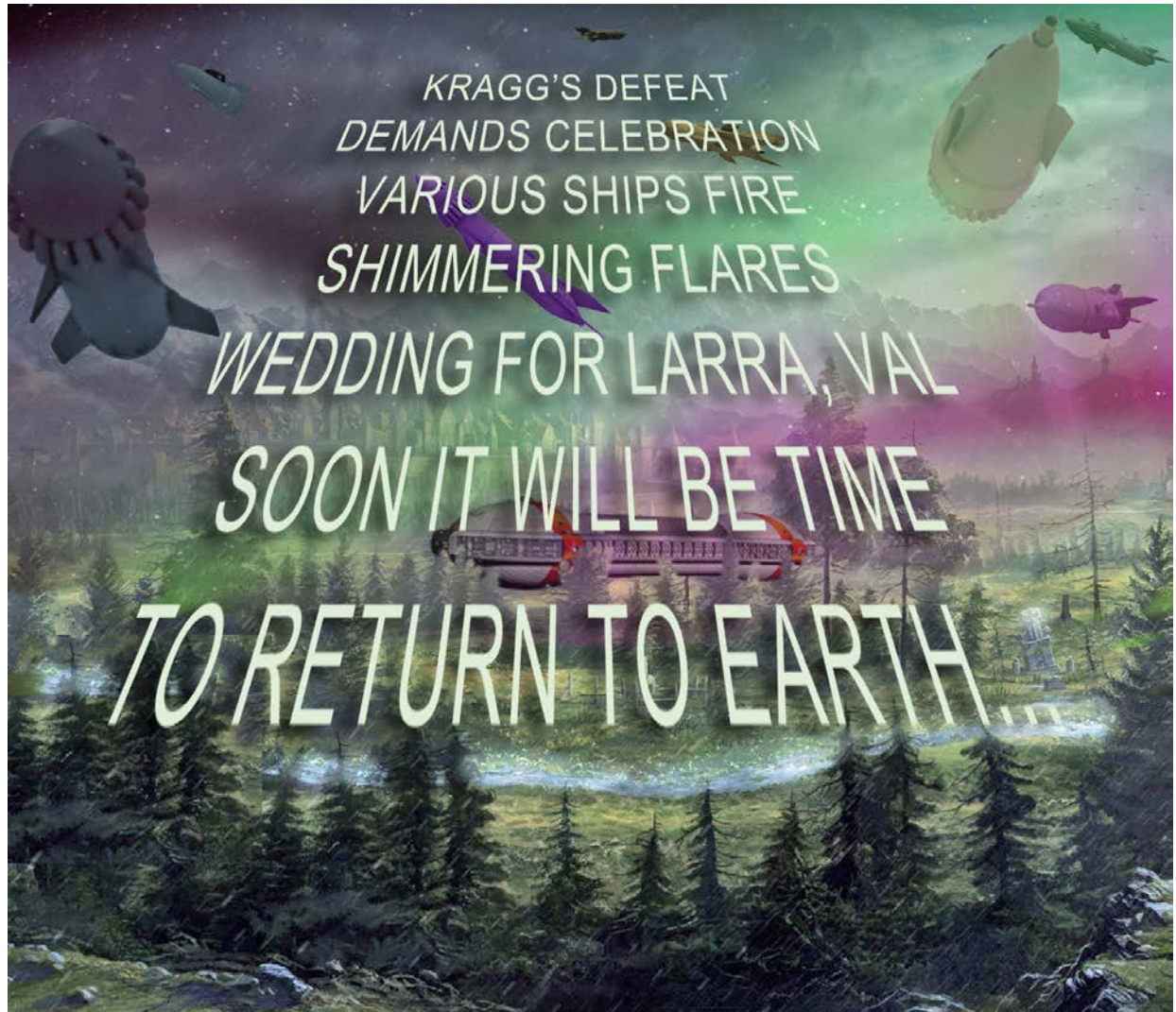
"You should know," cautioned Larra, feeling thrilled, but realizing that Val preferred women to men, "that I am actually still a male, appearances to the contrary."

"If only all men looked like you!" she replied wistfully. "But I'm puzzled, my dear; how did you move so fast?"

"I'm really not sure," explained Larra, "but when I thought you might be killed, I was apparently able to teleport in spurts."

Val gave Larra an emotional hug. "I love you; marry me...please!"

"Okay," replied Larra excitedly. "I love you too!"



*KRAGG'S DEFEAT
DEMANDS CELEBRATION
VARIOUS SHIPS FIRE
SHIMMERING FLARES
WEDDING FOR LARRA, VAL
SOON IT WILL BE TIME
TO RETURN TO EARTH...*



TWELVE Celebration

Hand-in-hand, with Dr. Zelenka to the right, Val to the left, and Larra in the middle, they emerged from the citadel and strode onto a wide terrace. Others followed directly behind them, including Aimli and a bandaged Taluhn. Below, Taegellan troops wildly cheered. Overhead, scout ships crisscrossed the sky, firing rockets that created a fantastic late-afternoon display.

Prince Aahn and Princess Telanna met them, grabbed their wrists, and raised their arms to the sky. In his enthusiasm, Aahn embraced and kissed everyone, including Dr. Zelenka, Aimli, and Taluhn.

"Hear this, my people!" shouted Aahn. "I promise a solemn oath: as this day wanes, so does the old order! Tomorrow we shall begin anew!"

Upon urging from Aahn, Larra stepped forward, as the onlookers went crazy. Tomorrow, she would begin a new life, when she and Val would start preparations for their wedding.

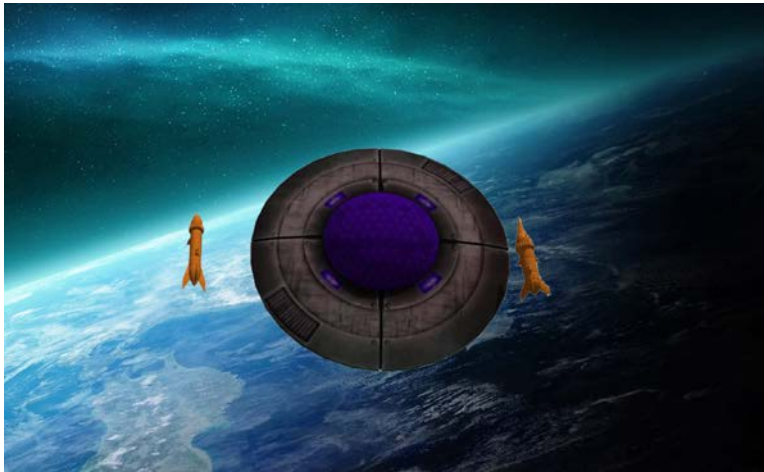
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The wedding was subdued, much to Larra's relief. She and Val both wore red dresses, which was the Relkash custom. There has never been a same-gender wedding in Xehbora before. For many, it was the spectacle of a lifetime. A priest waved a scepter and pronounced them married. There was no ring ceremony. Prince Aahn filled in the paperwork, while everyone greeted Larra and Val with a salute. Dr. Zelenka shook their hands.

“Now we need to plan our trip home,” sighed Larra.

“I have some ideas to make it more convenient,” suggested Dr. Zelenka.

* * *



It was the first test of the *Terra-2*, which was a very large, saucer-shaped spacecraft. They were accompanied by two standard-sized Xehboran rocketships, as they journeyed above a distant planet.

Larra held Val's hand. Val was now very pregnant.

“Taegellan scientists did not properly decipher the physics of the *Legendary Ones*,” explained Dr. Zelenka. “Beth and I have correctly deduced how to implement the physics.” Beth was Dr. Zelenka's new woman friend, who was a scientist kidnapped from earth a few years ago.

“The *Legendary Ones* travelled in saucer-shaped craft, which had an integrated matter translator device in addition to the gravitonic drive. They had no need of a matter bridge. Once all the bugs are ironed out, we can be home within two days of departure,” he continued.

* * *

The *Terra-2* rested in a grassy field next to the main Xehboran airfield. As the last container of cargo was loaded, the wide cargo door swung down and closed. Departure time was less than thirty minutes away.

Larra stood next the Val, as they discussed last minute details with Aahn. They both wore dresses with matching jackets and shoes. Larra was dressed in black and Val in gray. Their outfits were a variation of the one the Quemgi had made for Larra three years ago. It was now the fashion rage of all Taegella. Beside them stood their two-year-old twins, in their little green dresses. Ian stood beside his father, and Rise beside her mother.

Raina arrived with her personal baggage and several of her staff. She literally beamed with joy, not having been reduced to a lowly status in life. Those ancient, outmoded laws had all been repealed by the new *Democratic Constitution* of Taegella. Aahn had appointed her as his first ambassador to Earth. The other surviving Earthers, whom Kragg had kidnapped, were already boarding the ship. They would have wild tales to recount, and the new gender of some would shock their relatives and acquaintances.

"Goodbye, my friend!" said Aahn as he and Larra placed hands on each others shoulders and stepped out a half circle.

"Someday, we'll come back," replied Larra. "There are going to be a lot of changes on Earth too," she added, as she spied Dr. Zelenka carrying another case of schematic diagrams to the ship.

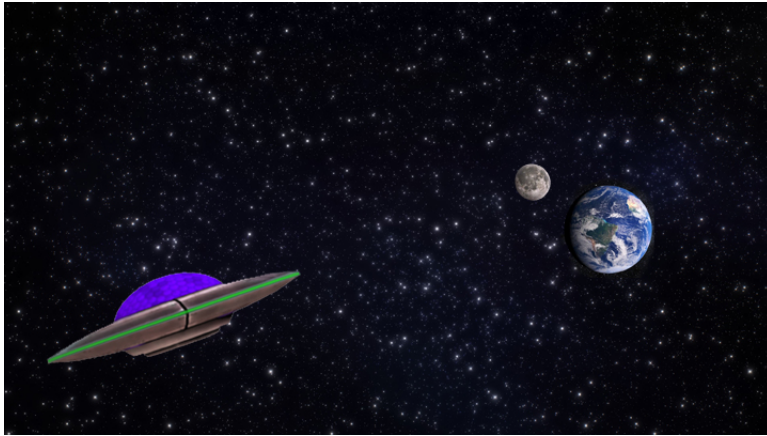
"Can Aahn's autocracy really pass as democracy?" whispered Val to Larra.

"Not likely," replied Larry softly, "but he is crafty and might just pull it off."

As the outer hatch closed, the inner airlock door slid upwards. Within moments, they were space borne, on course for their rendezvous with their exit point from the star system.

Momentarily, the matter translator hummed to life; an indicator light said they were good to go.

* * *



"Not quite like the old days, is it, Doc," commented Larra as she piloted the ship toward Earth.

"Definitely not; you were different, and I had not yet deciphered all the complex Taegellan physics. Wait until I turn the scientific world upside down!"

"And we, my dear, will change people's perception of gender for all time," added Val as she gave Larra a kiss.

"Where should we land?" asked Doc.

"How about the White House lawn," replied Larra seriously? "After you contact the Pentagon and the FAA, to warn them, of course!"

As the *Terra-2* crossed high above the Pacific Ocean, Larra rose to her feet. She and Val embraced and kissed, as North America appeared on the horizon.

"Home sweet home: it never looked so good," said Val, as tears streaked from their eyes. *'When we left, I was a loner, now I am an almost normal family woman with a wife and children of my own. It doesn't get any better than this!'*

Dr. Zelenka looked at them and then back at the viewscreen and smiled.

THE END