

Chapter 2: Home Is the Hunter

She told me the ancient Voice Zoroaster taught the prayer: “I beseech of you for wealth of many kinds which gives power to its holder, and for an offspring self-dependent whom multitudes will bless.”²

Tell me that does not speak to the soul of a Nietzschean.

— Tamerlane Anasazi, *Memories of the Matriarch*, “Enlightened Self-Interest”

Imani wasn’t fooled. Even if Tyr appreciated the respite from his convoluted, dangerous life, he was still Nietzschean. Selfish and suspicious. Arrogant and ambitious. Driven to prove himself and procreate. Possessed of a manipulative mindset and an implacable will to power.

And homesick. Not that he’d ever admit it. But she didn’t need a month of encountering his memories to recognize the restlessness eating at him. When she realized he painted for recreation, she bought a set of acrylics, brushes and sponges, sanding block, and glass panels. Touched, he put her gift to good use. Though unskilled herself, she appreciated good art. She found his a unique, if roughhewn, meld of primal and structured elements. There was an appeal to it, an aliveness, a searching quality...the fingerprint of someone striving to balance love, loss, life, and self. Perhaps the role of reclusive artist might serve him in her world, especially when the time came that he must make his way without her. But painting didn’t ease his turmoil.

It didn’t help that he’d also received her memories. If anything, they’d sledgehammered home to him just how alone and alien he was here. He was safer now, being able to use her memories to better blend into the society around him. But the more he blended in, the more he had to suppress all that made him the man he was born to be. He couldn’t afford to rise to his potential, to stand out in any meaningful way. He certainly could never hope to conquer and rule this planet. Not even the most perfect Nietzschean, they agreed, could stand alone against nearly ten billion adversaries spread across three worlds and countless asteroids. Nor could he escape to another world. He was trapped, perhaps doomed to spend the century or more left to him living a pretense, a shackled and half-realized life. He would survive, she knew; but would his spirit, his soul?

Perhaps the only saving grace, she thought, was Tyr’s knowledge that he had a son. She knew how he feared for Tamerlane’s safety without a father’s protection. How he wondered what devious trash Olma, idiotic and almost certainly vindictive Matriarch without a Pride, was teaching the boy. Still, Tyr was absolutely certain Tamerlane would survive and grow into his own. After all, wasn’t the boy the Promised One To Come? The Prophet-Child? The genetic reincarnation of Drago Museveni, destined to unite the Nietzschean Prides?

The *true* genetic reincarnation. Not as Nietzscheans loosely called any somatic duplicate of an ancestor...a mere look-alike. Not even a scientifically defined genetic reincarnation: a naturally conceived person who duplicates more than ninety-nine point nine-nine-five percent of the genetic map of some ancestor at least three generations removed. No, to be the Promised One, the genetic reincarnation of Drago Museveni must exhibit an exact, one hundred percent, gene-map match with the Progenitor’s remains. And Tamerlane Anasazi did, though only Tyr and Imani knew it for an absolute fact.

They seldom talked about any of this; Tyr preferred not to belabor what couldn’t be remedied. But sometimes they did. And sometimes the silence broke Imani’s heart.

If only, she thought, Tyr could be rid of his nanobots. And the artificial 13-gene ring chromosome residing

² From *The Zend-Avesta*, Yasna 65:11, To the Waters.

in every Nietzschean cell, when current bio-science wasn't anywhere near the amazing leap from multiple necessary but fragile evolved rings in the mitochondrion to embedding a single, complete, stable, and sturdy new one in the nucleus. Nanobots and nuclear rings...those two things irrevocably claimed his alien nature and could make him a prime target for exploiters who'd surely rush to dissect him, figuratively and literally. Never mind what would happen if such people got their hands on advanced nanobotic and engineering technology.

Of course, having nanobots was equally dangerous to Imani...and society. She'd have to take steps to ensure they remained unknown to the world. No more medical care, though the nanobots themselves would offset that loss. No doing anything that might lead to a blood test, DNA sample, or even X-ray. At least she need not worry about the nanobots being found after she died; their post-mortem disintegration would prevent that.

Without his Nietzschean nanobots, though, Tyr would be more vulnerable. And without that ring chromosome, he simply wouldn't be Nietzschean.

And, of course, there were the bone blades. Losing his blades would be like...well, she understood the analogy. But if only his blades stood between him and the opportunity to assume a role as Alpha of, essentially, the whole human species, she knew what choice he'd make. Wealth accumulated by whatever means. Contacts identified through bribery, service, intimidation. A quick operation in some underworld med-center catering to those with sufficient funds and something to hide. And precautions taken so no whisper ever surfaced to haunt him. If only that were all. But it wasn't. And what can't be cured must be endured.

Still, it wasn't long before Tyr personally encountered the city's dark underbelly. Returning homeward from a long run in the wee hours of a summer night, he and Imani were accosted by two large men clad, gloved, and masked in dull black. One brandished a powerful handgun with silencer and ordered them into a blind alley. Without a word or glance, Imani and Tyr complied, moving deep into the narrow darkness. The predatory pair followed confidently, firmly in control with their deadly weapon, knowing even their male victim was afraid...if not for himself, at least for his companion. They carefully kept their whispers too low for their targets to hear.

"Damn, they're big. Both of 'em."

"So soon as we're hidden from the street, you get her down. I'm not messing with him; bam through the brain. Then I take her out, we grab those backpacks, and we're gone."

"What, no fun first?"

"You and your...all right, we'll see. But first hint of anyone witnessing anything, she's dead and we're out of here, I don't care where your pants are. You got me?"

"OK, OK, no prob. We're out of sight. Let's get it on."

In the brutal, whirlwind encounter, one of the men suffered a bullet through the heart and the other a shattered spine. As Imani stood looking down at the corpse she'd created, Tyr tried to ease her trauma.

"The first kill is always the hardest."

She turned and looked at him for a quiet moment.

"Yes, it was."

As she turned away again, Tyr blinked. Did she mean what he thought she did? Not that he'd ever ask, or belittle her by rummaging through her memories for the answer.

Imani whispered a prayerful word over the bodies. Then she and Tyr quietly did what was necessary to finish protecting themselves. Afterwards, heading home, Tyr once more tried to offer comfort.

"Imani, I 'remember' your religion doesn't allow you to kill. But they were planning to kill you. And before that...well, no woman should face that, ever."

"You didn't let enough memories surface, Tyr. To my understanding, my Faith does allow it, when there's

no other recourse. Not in self-defense; but in defense of another, yes. Had it just been about me, I'd have tried to disable them, get the gun away, summon the cops. But I was rushed. He was going to execute you. Not even you are faster than a bullet. I appreciate your wanting to ease my mind, Tyr; but it's not necessary. We did what we had to do, it's done, and I did nothing wrong."

According to news stories over the succeeding days, the bodies lay unnoticed till daylight. A police canvass unearthed no witnesses. The crime-scene combers found no trace of anyone else's presence. The evidence clearly indicated an altercation had started on a high roof and ended in an intertwined fall, during which the gunman fatally shot his opponent, then snapped his own spine on landing. The police chalked it up to two low-lives with mile-long rap sheets taking each other out in some kind of deal gone bad. No one claimed the bodies.

The primal encounter relieved some of Tyr's suppressive tension. He went back to enjoying Imani's company, especially their workout sessions, autumnal excursions, and quiet evenings spent sharing music, reading to each other, or playing Martian chess. She thought it amusing that he almost always chose Wagner to listen to and Nietzsche, Rand, or Dawkins to read. He was amused that, though they both made exquisite use of the knight with its unexpected twists, and even sometimes set their respective kings on the attack, the strongest pieces in his play were the solid rook and the driving imam while hers were the protective counselor and the matriarchal queen.

Since spring, Imani had sometimes taken solitary trips, remaining away overnight or for several days. She took a longer-than-usual trip in early autumn, but Tyr didn't mind his week-long solitude. He even cared for the cats. Tyr often professed not to understand what use cats were. And in the first months after his arrival, they'd obviously held the same opinion regarding him. Lately, though, they were accepting him as someone worth sitting with. Imani even occasionally caught him acknowledging one or another's existence with a meaty morsel or surreptitious stroke.

On the anniversary morning of Tyr's precipitous arrival in her home, Imani was watching him and brown Bard pointedly ignoring each other on the kitchen bench, when Tyr jerked and almost dropped the glass he was holding. At her puzzled frown, he waved a hand for quiet.

#Tyr? Tyr, is that you? Can you hear me? It's gotta be you! Tyr, listen, we're communicating mentally, but you have to speak out loud to focus your surface thoughts. Are you in a safe place to do that? Can you answer me? Please answer me, Tyr. It's really me, honest; you're not crazy, OK?#

"Of course I'm not crazy, you annoying little man! Why would I fear being susceptible to insanity? And what took you so long? I've been trapped here for a year."

Imani's eyes widened as Tyr spoke in Common; then she took a deep breath, slowly released it, and smiled. Tyr nodded, and held eye contact with her during the ensuing – and, to her, one-sided – conversation with a voice he'd expected never to hear again.

#Only a year, you big ingrate? Hey, you have no idea. We've been trying to find you for almost seven freaking years, here! And it's gonna be another half year before we can get you back, too. For us anyway. Not for you, blast your luck. You wouldn't believe how fractally screwy the French-curve formula is for trying to match up time there and here. It not only doesn't run at the same rate, it doesn't even run at the same difference in rate from one day to the next. It's a nightmare.#

"But you can retrieve me? How soon, on this end?"

#Yeah, we can. Me, Hühne, Rekeeb and a gazillion technists and admins we've had working on all this interdimensional research. Look, calibration's a bear; and this tunneler sucks energy like a solar imploder. A red-giant imploder, OK? We've got about ninety seconds left on this communications window, so listen up.

We'll have a ten-second retrieval window in, let me check, uh, exactly two million standard seconds for you, on my mark...hold it...*mark*. If you miss that one, my great-grandkids'll be back to try again when you're about eighty. So be ready. Be in exactly the planetary position you arrived at. Can you do that?#

"Yes. Harper, I arrived here naked. Do I assume that means I can't take anything through the tunnel this time either?"

#You did? Beka, too. The Derevo weren't, so we assumed it was specific to her. We thought we knew why; but I guess not, unless her proximity affected you, too. Yeah, forgot to tell you she came back. In pretty bad shape, but she recovered. What about you? No, never mind. You're alive and we have the chance to retrieve you; s'all I care about right now. Anyway, Höhne determined it's possible, with the equipment we have now, to shift with you whatever living matter is touching you, as long as it doesn't out-mass you when you entered the tunnel. So, like, if you've gotten fat there, or want to bring me a legendary silver-coin tree, it's OK. But only living matter. So unless you can find a nice, friendly Sardis wolf or whatever to wrap around you, you're likely to arrive naked again. I'll make sure we have a wrapper ready for you.#

"You do that, Harper. I'll also need a fast, hardened, ranger-sized slipship."

#You'll have one, guaranteed.#

"Good. What'll the standard date be when I get there? Harper? Harper?!"

Tyr shook himself, stared into his red ginger beer for several minutes, then chugged it. Appreciative of Imani's silence as he'd digested what had just happened, he filled her in on Harper's half of the dialogue. There was no disguising his relief at the prospect of going home. When he mentioned not being able to take any "memorabilia" with him. Imani laughed.

"Don't worry, Tyr. I've no intention of saddling you with a load of unwanted sentimental junk. But you know, you didn't actually arrive with nothing."

She went to her desk, retrieved the cloth-wrapped broken blade from a drawer, and handed it to him. They pondered why that artifact, and nothing else, had made the transition with him. Perhaps having it held tightly in his mouth, drenched in his saliva and blood, had somehow made it read to the tunnel as a living part of Tyr himself...which probably explained why his nanobots had also survived the trip.

That night, Imani lay awake thinking, remembering. She was genuinely happy for Tyr. Still, she'd miss him; he'd so enriched her life. She clung to the thought that what they'd shared would keep her pondering for the rest of her years. She also hoped what they'd shared would prove of value to him in his universe. But she had to be strong now, stay detached, let nothing show that would interfere with his happiness. She was determined to pack as much more sharing and learning as possible into the short time left. Little more than three weeks. He'd given her a mark to synchronize their nanobots; but she almost wished she could remain unaware of the inexorable countdown.

She looked back over their year together. Their excursions and conversations. The times they were friendly opponents, physically, mentally, verbally. The times they were open, gentle, or protective with each other. Times when they simply functioned in parallel, aware of each other but engaged in separate pursuits. Other times when they were intensely involved in learning from and teaching each other, or in accomplishing a common goal. Mentor, student, guide, guardian, medic, companion, friend. So many roles with each other.

The only thing they'd never been was lovers. She momentarily wished...but, no. They both had an ingrained aversion to mating with anyone not a spouse. The impending separation did nothing to change that...and rightfully so.

In the following days, Imani strove to accumulate her final treasury of moments shared with Tyr. But he

seemed so pensive, almost withdrawn, as if already home in his mind. No longer trapped in this primitive and lonely world sans family, friends, and resources, he had no further need of her. He was rightfully eager, she knew, to put all this behind him and embrace his future again, in his universe.

She was wrong. Tyr was also looking back over their time together, trying to come to a decision he did, and did not, want to make. He mulled over some of her conversations and activities, with him and with others.

For a Norm, she'd seemed from the first to be strong, centered, and proficient in survival. Of course, survival on her world was a lot easier for her than survival in his universe was for him. Still, he'd come to respect her.

And since she'd been infected with his nanobots, they'd obviously been changing her. He saw signs they were enhancing her senses, rejuvenating her organs, hardening her musculature, strengthening her bones. She looked a little younger, moved even more easily, and was definitely much stronger than a year ago. Not as strong as a Nietzschean woman, or even a heavy-worlder, but outstanding for a Norm. And she could run as hard, fast, and long as he, now.

But it was her words that swirled around and around in his mind. Words about faith, especially new faith. About her perception of his son as one in a line she called Messengers of God. About what that might bode for his son, for him, for the Nietzschean race, for the human species. About Tyr's own misuse of the words "different species" when it was obvious *Homo sapiens sapiens* and *Homo sapiens invictus* were merely different races of the same species...else why would sex and the possibility of procreation between them, and resulting in fertile offspring, even be an issue. Even before any nanobot enhancement could be cited as causation, her mental acuity had more than once blindsided him.

More words leaped up from memory. Words in English and even in Common, which she now, of course, spoke as well as he did. Words about Ayn Rand's novels, and how badly she'd actually missed the Nietzschean mark. About Nietzsche's own writing with its occasional gems buried in verbose, turgid, and spurious self-importance. About the true meaning of "God is dead" and "enlightened self-interest" and the hierarchy of forms of survival. About the difference between rules and groundrules, how cheating that breaks the rules could still be part of the groundrules, and why two people playing exactly the same game could have completely different definitions of winning...and both be right.

That last one made him smile. They'd been watching a real-time Chicago Bulls game on the plasma screen, and it reminded him of his basketball games with Dylan. He hadn't been interested in the plasmavised game *per se*, but Imani – believing he might be trapped in her world for years or even the rest of his life – had suggested watching professional competitions as a way to understand certain cultural norms. They'd settled on basketball because of his games with Dylan and because she'd gotten her collegiate education paid in full through a basketball scholarship in addition to her three scholastic-merit scholarships, doing very well in the sport without shirking academics. Still, he'd been little impressed with this gaudily clad "once-again super team's" prowess, and totally unimpressed with the myriad official rules. He'd been surprised when Imani had concurred.

"By tacitly agreeing on what forms of 'cheating' were and weren't part of your sport, you and Dylan actually played more honest games. And you both won. Besides healthy exercise, Tyr, you personally enjoyed winning the physical contest. Dylan, on the other hand, enjoyed having someone to play with...and not getting killed. Win-win."

Tyr compressed his lips and sniffed. But she knew he got what she was saying.

"Plus," she continued, "permitting cheating as one of the groundrules cyclically teaches the cheater to become more subtle and the cheated more alert. Rational cheating, anyway. Of course, the more one breaks the

rules, the less unexpected – and thus less effective – one’s rule-breaking becomes. But even when your moves were unanticipated, Tyr, you didn’t get points just for blindsiding Dylan; you had to sink the basket afterward. And when you knocked him out of your way, you didn’t gore or kill him. Good thing, too; that might’ve ruined the game.”

What was it with this woman, anyway? It was hard enough suppressing her cross-loaded memories in his head. Which he’d have to do draconically once he got home, lest he go all soft, naïve, trusting, and truthful at the most inopportune moments. But his own memories of her just wouldn’t quit. It was hard admitting to himself that this essentially prehistoric, decidedly non-Nietzschean woman kept teaching him things about himself...and about being Nietzschean.

Each aware of the approaching deadline, each unsure, they circled around each other for a week before Imani decided time was too short to keep wasting it. She accosted him as he was preparing one of his signature gourmet repasts for them.

“It’s OK that you’re looking towards your *real* future and putting this strange past behind you. Enough with holding your tongue...with being *kind* to me. Spit it out and get on with it.”

Tyr glared at her and took a deep, shuddering breath as if holding his temper. His emotionless words, when they finally came, stunned her.

“Come with me.”

Imani stared at Tyr, but his face and body language gave nothing away. He was exercising iron control, unexpressive, unmoving. She considered the ramifications of his...offer? Request? Concession? Demand?

If he’d reported Harper’s words faithfully, it was possible. She was living matter; and even with the new bone density and musculature his nanobots were effecting in her, she certainly didn’t outmass him. But had Tyr told the truth? Or was this a trick to dispose of the only person in this era who not only knew of his sojourn, but had all his memories of the far-flung future...and his nanobots? Would he watch her devise a cover for her disappearance, then kill her? Could he abandon her in the tunnel? Was she slated to die the minute she reached his universe? Privy to his memories, she knew none of it was beyond him. When necessary, he was utterly ruthless.

Still, to meet this man’s son. To live, if only for a mayfly moment, in the day of a Messenger. And, if only she could, to help Tyr achieve his life’s dream, the resurrection of his Pride. His memories showed his ruthlessness was tempered by a strange but undeniable sense of *noblesse oblige*. The way to survive in Tyr Anasazi’s universe was to be indispensable not only to his survival, but to his soul. Assuming the retrieval even worked.

The odds were slim, perhaps, but sufficient. Her words were as calm as his.

“On one condition.”

“Which is?”

“I know templates for casting a Pride’s double helix *must* be programmed by a Pride member who’s already wed and procreated, or it’s meaningless. When we arrive, make me a template to cast a double helix...” *That* made him raise an eyebrow. “...so I can offer it to you.”

“Offer it. No more than that.”

“No more.”

“I promise.”

“Hmph. Nietzschean promises. Make a *commitment*.”

Tyr stared at her for a long moment, then took another deep breath. “You have my commitment.”

He turned away and busied himself with their food. He couldn’t let her see how the conversation had shaken him. He really didn’t know why he’d even asked her. Of course, he still, all this time later, didn’t know why

he'd ever asked *Yvaine* to join the Andromeda, either. Or why he'd been tempted to stay with her on Midden. At least *this* ancient world didn't tempt him; he could barely stand to wait the remaining fortnight. But as much as he'd surprised himself with his offer to Yvaine, he'd felt a certain relief when she demurred. Imani, now...he really did want her to come with him. For no reason he could logically fathom, it felt right. As if, more like Beka than Yvaine, she was neither servant nor ward but a valued companion-in-arms.

Tellingly, neither Tyr nor Imani ever hinted there was any doubt but that the rescue would proceed and succeed as planned.

Having decided to accompany Tyr, Imani made rapid, efficient plans. Her first step was to summon her children to meet in her home on the eve before retrieval. Despite her not telling them why, they agreed without question. Assured they could all come – fortunately, her eldest was on a month's Earthside rotation – she prepared a packet for each of them detailing what personal property of hers to take.

That covered, she proceeded to finalize the two short-term projects she was consulting on, and to hand off her other work and her resource and reference databases to trusted colleagues. Closing her bank accounts and prepaying her taxes, she divided the substantial remaining funds and her sheltered investments for disbursement to actual and potential grandchildren, the Funds and the Trust, and personal charities. She also arranged for insurance policies, credit accounts, utilities, Net lines, and the like to be cancelled on the day after retrieval. All in all, she set her affairs in order as if emigrating to the Aresian colonies. And she composed farewells to friends and neighbors, “accidentally” hinting in a few cases that her impending disappearance might be courtesy of a federally classified witness-protection program. And in every waking moment not otherwise occupied, she speedily scanned through numerous books, trusting them to her nanobot-enhanced eidetic memory.

The eve before departure finally arrived, as did her children. Imani joyously hugged each of them and then, much to their surprise, introduced them to the year-long houseguest they'd been unaware of. They suddenly realized why all the year's familial encounters had occurred in their hometowns rather than hers.

Tyr had offered to cook for her family, but Imani had demurred. This visit was the last chance she'd ever have to break bread with her time-bound children; it was for her hands to prepare and serve the meals. For this supper, she included a special favorite of each sibling: baba ganoush for Rocklan, Athenian steak for Kamalieh, black beans and rice for Simba and, ironically, no-liq tiramisu for Gizelle.

Supper was fun, full of good food, witty repartee, and catching up on news, accomplishments, and the antics of progeny. Afterwards, everyone helped clean up and then settled into the comfortable conversation area. And there Imani briefly told her children who Tyr was and where she was going with him.

Her quiet announcement led to an understandable uproar. Imani sat silently as her children chaotically talked over each other, quickly realized they were getting nowhere, settled down somewhat and, by eye contact, passed the baton to the intense and uninhibited Gizelle.

“Moms, what could you possibly be thinking? This has got to be a scam. You're being conned. It's insane!”

“If it is, Geezee joon, we'll know tomorrow, won't we? Stay here with us till then. If nothing happens, well, then nothing happens. But I believe it will. I've every reason in the world to believe Tyr is who he says he is and came from where and when he says he did. Starting with something I saw mere seconds after his arrival, inexplicable by any biotechnology *we* have.”

At her gesture, Tyr removed his sweatshirt and flexed his bone blades. The four siblings were speechless. At his suggestion, each examined the blades in turn, with wide eyes and wary fingers. He then showed them the broken knife that had traversed the tunnel with him, and bade Rocklan use it to make a small wound on Tyr's chest. As blood dripped, then quickly slowed, he went to the exercise area and demonstrated his beyond-human

strength and speed, as well as the acuity of his senses. He also offered to face any structured puzzle-solving challenge, and handily trounced them all. Finally, he reminded them of the knife wound; and they were amazed at how far its healing had progressed in so short a time.

They were shocked, though, when Tyr suddenly picked up the broken knife and cut their mother's arm. With roars of outrage, Rocklan and Simba grabbed at him; but it was Gizelle who landed a solid kick on his kneecap. Only at Imani's forceful "Look!" did they desist. As they watched, the blood on her arm gradually but perceptibly slowed, stopped, clotted, and transmuted into a narrow scar. She assured them it would completely heal within hours, thanks to her contingent of Tyrian nanobots.

Still, the siblings were not satisfied. After a few whispers, the baton passed to Rocklan.

"OK, you're right. He definitely seems alien and all. And perhaps he is a time traveler. But...well, it's your safety, you know? How can you be sure he's not just trying to get you away from here and then get rid of you? After all, you not only know about him, you even have his, what, nanobots. Moms, how do you know he doesn't just want you dead? For that matter, this gathering is awfully convenient; how do we know he doesn't want *us* dead?"

"Because, number-one son, I also have his memories. They came with his nanobots. You're right, it could be a deadly ploy, but I honestly don't believe so. And what I think and feel are all I ever have to go on."

Brow furrowed in puzzlement, a tear in the corner of his eye, Simba took his mother's hand in both of his.

"But why, Moms?"

"I wish I could explain in depth, cub of mine, but I don't dare. I know about the future I'm going to. I know it from Tyr's memories. I know what's there, and I long to see it. More than anything else, I long to...no, I shan't tell you that. I've thought carefully about what I might safely tell you, what hints I dare voice. I've chosen those words carefully, and you'll hear them tomorrow. I need to stick to that. I don't know if the future is immutable. I think it is, but there's always uncertainty. Please accept my silence. Please trust that it isn't for lack of trusting you. But please trust my decision, too; I didn't make it lightly."

Simba nodded sadly and turned to Kamalieh. It seemed she, calm and soft-spoken, was always the last sibling to speak in family councils...and the one everybody listened to.

"Mother joon, are you in love with Tyr?"

Imani blinked, then gestured at Tyr's forearms folded across his chest.

"Tyr is Nietzschean. Do you think I'm a fool?"

"Never, Mother. Never a fool." Kamalieh turned to her siblings. "She isn't. Never has been. Nor reckless, unthinking. We know that. Are we going to mistrust her judgment now? Just because she's surprised us? We shouldn't even be surprised. This is *Moms*. When has she ever been afraid to embrace the unexpected and unique? When did she ever teach us to be afraid?"

"Rock, you often ask why Mother doesn't retire; she could certainly afford to. Well, now she's decided to retire. From a career, a place, a time. But not from life. She's been here for us all our lives, encouraging and applauding our adventures. Now she has a chance for this unimaginable adventure of her own. One chance. And we're not going to rob her of it, period. So stop looking all glum. Be supportive. Be happy!"

Rocklan, Simba, and Gizelle stood silent, pondering Kamalieh's words, taking them to heart. One by one, they reached the same conclusion, and nodded. Imani smiled and wordlessly gathered them into a family hug. As they separated afterwards, she patted Kamalieh's cheek. This daughter, her perfect pearl, always understood her best. Understood her words and her silences. Understood her heart and soul.

Sleep the farthest thing from anyone's mind, the group returned to the conversation area to relax and talk of

family things. Imani gave the siblings their packets and explained all the provisions she'd made for her departure. Night blended into morning, and they broke fast together, still sharing family small-talk and advice. One by one, though, the children found comfortable spots and drifted off to sleep. Imani decided to let them be until shortly before she and Tyr were scheduled to go.

As the hour of retrieval approached, Imani broached some final ideas with Tyr. The first was that they stand back to back, so they'd have the greatest chance to protect themselves if necessary both in and at the moment of their arrival beyond the tunnel. Tyr concurred. Imani also suggested their torsos be minimally clad, allowing the maximum in dermal contact to ensure Harper's Tyr-oriented retrieval wave would capture them both. She reminded Tyr their clothing likely wouldn't shift with them anyway, adding she was glad her children were unaware of that fact. Again Tyr concurred. He shed the open vest he'd donned during the night; and she stripped off her sweater, beneath which she was wearing an abbreviated halter.

Next, Imani proposed that, as he'd done before, they each clench a knife in their teeth, in hopes this might provide them the opportunity to carry some weaponry with them. Tyr considered this reasonable; precaution should not be rejected just because it's a gamble. So Imani climbed to the loft and returned with a small and beautifully hand-carved puzzle box. Unlocking its mysteries, she withdrew two knives Tyr had never seen before; that's what he got, it seemed, for respecting her bedstead privacy. The first knife she withdrew from its well-preserved leather sheath was a foot-long, black-hilted, Gerber Mark II antique...more than half its length a dagger-shaped blade with serrations near the hilt. She handed Tyr this knife. As he examined the carefully honed and oiled steel, he realized it was so dense it could hold a fifteen-degree edge.

"It's a strong weapon, Tyr. Specifically designed to rip through the skins of aircraft."

"I suspect it could rip through the skin of the Maru." Tyr's exaggeration nonetheless showed his admiration for the all-business blade in his hand. He started to hand it back, but Imani waved it away as she drew from its ballistic-fabric sheath a companion covert knife, two-thirds the size, unserrated, black-bladed to avoid telltale reflections, but just as finely and acutely honed. Tyr looked at her in surprise.

"You're giving me your belt blade, and keeping only your boot blade for yourself?"

"What kind of fools would we be, Nietzschean, if our better warrior weren't wielding our better weapon?"

Tyr sighed deeply. He was sure she remembered he'd once made just such a foolish move with Harper...and what that had led to. Still, he well understood the import of what she'd just done. And since they might encounter enemies in scant minutes, he pricked his left palm with the long blade, blooding it so that his nano-bots might invade and attack anyone who tasted his steel. Imani did likewise with her smaller blade.

Looking at him significantly, Imani broached one more idea, again taking him completely by surprise.

"I don't know what resources I might have access to in your universe. So it's in my best interest to bring resources of my own. Since I don't mass as much as you, we have some leeway. The Perseids have advanced cloning technology. Domestic cats become extinct before your time, and I suspect they'd be a welcome rarity throughout the Norm-inhabited worlds, as both pets and vermin controllers. We'll be holding our blades with our teeth; our hands'll be free. If we time things correctly and are both holding a cat in each arm as we shift, we'll be able to take all four with us. I think their cloned progeny will prove extremely profitable to me as breeding stock."

Tyr snorted. "And if we're attacked as we arrive?"

Imani smiled. "Then they'll prove equally valuable as weapons. I guarantee you if you throw a freaked-out cat at your enemy's head, it *will* distract him."

Tyr snorted again, this time sardonically. He liked the image.

With time growing short, Imani woke her children and had them each corral and hold one cat. One last time, she hugged each of her children and gave them a kiss. Then she and Tyr moved into position.

“If you remember nothing else, remember these four things. Rocklan, Forester needs to join with the line of the late and widely-mourned president emeritus of Uganda. And to lay that cornerstone before humankind escapes this solar system. Simba, you are the roaring lions and the rearing bears I’ve given to this world. Know that family is your strength and your solace. Kamalieh, let each generation pass on to its firstborn this truth: that the genetic reincarnation of the Progenitor will return to unite the Prides. Don’t worry what it means; just remember and pass it on. Gizelle, I regret I won’t be here to share your vahid and see how you mature into all you promise to be; but *I* promise *you* I’ll celebrate with the family in spirit.” She spread her hands to encompass her four children. “I’m proud of you all. I love you, and forever will.”

Before any of the children could reply, Tyr announced he could hear Harper. The retrieval wave was being activated. Tyr and Imani quickly clenched their knives in their teeth, the children handed them the four cats and, with their sudden disappearance and the concussion of inflowing air, the siblings had proof that their mother’s unimaginable adventure was real.

* * * * *

“Two of them? Could’ve told us ahead of time, blast him. Hope this really is powerful enough for retrieving two people.”

Harper and Höhne were manning adjacent consoles of a new, extremely complex technostation. Standing out of their way, Rekeeb reacted to Harper’s words with a startled look at the large blue-green sheet folded over his arm. After a moment, he shook out the sheet, grabbed its long side in mid-edge and, with a sharp twist of both fists, started ripping it in half.

Harper and Höhne frantically manipulated their controls as, directly in front of Harper, a miniature tunnel began to form in a beam-barred faraday cage. A vague image started forming in the depths of the spectacular vortex, seeming to move towards them as it coalesced. Simultaneously, to Harper’s surprise, a second ghostly image started to form at the mouth of the tunnel. It existed for several seconds, flickering erratically and receding from him. Harper was dumbfounded to realize he was seeing an apparition of Tyr and Beka, fully clothed. The ghostly Tyr’s dreadlocks were swirling as if in a furious wind, and he was cradling a large weapon in arms bereft, Harper was shocked to see, of bone blades.

Harper also got momentary subliminal impressions of several other apparitions. He seemed to see the golden-skinned Trance and Telemachus Rhade of Tarazed walking together from right to left, and the same man moving left to right with a robe-clad Norm woman like the one approaching with Tyr. Where the paths of the two couples intersected, they phased through each other and disappeared. He also saw two solitary Tyr’s – one bladeless, the other with bone blades intact – falling as if the ground or floor beneath each had suddenly given way, a bladed fourth Tyr facing an older man and woman who were obviously related to him, and a fifth in partial body armor presenting a knife to a kneeling Derevo. In his excitement over the task of retrieving Tyr, though, Harper quickly forgot the apparitions. So quickly and completely, in fact, that it never occurred to him to view them later in the automatically recorded project archive.

As the apparition of Tyr and Beka faded for the final time, the approaching duo assumed solid form, standing back to back, naked and weaponless except for the knives clenched in their teeth. Each of them dropped a pair of screeching, writhing animals that immediately disappeared underneath and behind various lab fixtures. Rekeeb stood frozen, mouth open, until Höhne’s loud “ahem” spurred him to step forward and give the half-sheets to the new arrivals, who laid their knives on the closest console and wrapped the silky lengths

around themselves sarong-style.

Despite the years of gradual maturing, Harper had lost little of the demonstrativeness Tyr remembered. He could barely cover himself before Harper ran to him and excitedly hugged him, exclaiming at his rescue after so long. Tyr looked down at the engineer with an expression of slightly amused disdain. His fellow time-traveler, however, wasn't fooled. She knew if the somber Tyr could only let himself go, he'd grab Harper up, hug him till his ribs creaked, and spin him around like a long-lost baby brother.

Gently but firmly extracting himself from Harper's overzealous greeting, Tyr started to introduce his companion to their rescuers. Forestalling him, she embraced Harper.

"You must be Seamus Harper. What a pleasure to finally meet you! My name is Kol Kaguta." Ignoring Tyr's surprised glance, she also greeted Hühne with a firm and dignified handshake, then smiled and thanked the flustered Rekeeb for his help. Tyr noticed that, just as he'd spoken English with her Southern drawl, she now spoke Common with his precise tones.

Hühne was torn between the ecstasy of another successful breakthrough in temporal mechanics and his curiosity about the four strange animals that had just invaded his lab. When Kol explained what they were and why she'd brought them, Hühne was fascinated.

"Ms. Kaguta, I assure you we can clone, engineer, and cross-breed successfully from even so small a gene pool. And the profits from such a venture, equitably divided between us, may very well fund this whole project for a year or more and still make you rich beyond most beings' wildest dreams. May I ask, can you stay with us for, perhaps, three or six months to share your expertise? You are, after all, arguably the only being alive today who actually *knows* – from personal experience – how to interact with, um, cats."

Tyr, in private conversation with Harper, also overheard Hühne. He looked pleased when Kol agreed to remain as a consultant...at a reasonable reimbursement rate, of course. Obviously, she could make her own way without him. That settled, Tyr asked Harper to accompany him on a covert mission, citing a need for Harper's mechanical genius and ability to cyber-jack. Harper was flattered, and halfway confident Tyr wouldn't do anything guaranteed to get them killed. Besides, he was sure he knew what the mission, or at least the first step of it, was. He agreed to go if Hühne could spare him. They approached Hühne.

"I have a mission I must accomplish immediately. It's gone undone far too long in my absence. I need Harper's assistance. He's willing to accompany me for a half-year or so, while Kol stays to help you with the cat-cloning project. If you can spare him."

"Of course, Mr. Anasazi. You're welcome home, and you're welcome to my honored colleague's assistance. Not that he'd let me get away with refusing, I don't think. But this resurrection of an extinct species is a fascinating idea and will, I'm sure, occupy me quite adequately. After so many years of bleeding-edge physics and drawing-flexi technology, after the stress and excitement of finally achieving your rescue, I think we can all do with a hiatus of sorts, hmm? By all means, colleague Seamus, go with your, um, friend. Take the time you need. We'll continue our research when you return."

Relieved, Tyr turned to Kol. "Do what you can here, and when I return...."

"If you return."

Tyr's response to Kol's interruption was firm. "*When*. I have a commitment to keep."

Tyr abruptly turned away, opened the transparent lab door and, grabbing Harper by the shoulder, propelled him into the corridor. Suddenly the Persian, Sage, made a bid to escape through the open door. But he wasn't fast enough; Tyr scooped him up in mid-dash. To Harper's utter astonishment, Tyr cradled the frantic cat immobily against his chest, stroking it and calling it by name. Harper's amazement doubled when Sage calmed

down and began to purr. Tyr set the cat down on the floor inside the door, and Sage began to wander about investigating the lab.

As Tyr finally let the lab door slide closed and pushed Harper into motion, Kol gazed after him for a moment, then gathered up her knives and turned back to Hühne and Rekeeb. She knew if they, too, exited and left the cats alone to explore, the other three would eventually follow Sage's calming lead. They'd be safe in the locked lab until she could arrange quartering and supplies and return to gather them up.

"So. Barring any harm to my cats – which I will not countenance, Scientist Hühne, as I'm confident you understand – I concur this will be a fascinating project. Though I think I might make a better start if I get some rest and something, shall we say, less informal to wear?"

Once Tyr, too, had changed into proper attire, he pondered Harper's brief explanation of his tunnel journey.

"My subconscious desire to be where *I* started? That's what initially navigated me through the tunnel?"

"You or something really precious to you. Yeah, you got it, big guy. Though I purely can't see how that explains you ending up where, um, when you did."

"I can. And no, it's none of your business. So, what kind of ship did you acquire for me?"

"See for yourself. Here's your slipranger." Having led Tyr into a hanger, Harper waved his arm in a grandiose gesture.

Tyr's eyes widened as he realized what he was seeing. This was a Drago-Kasov ship. A personal yacht, but not a toy. Fast, maneuverable, powerful, hardened, well-armed for its size, roomy enough to carry a large family, a small cargo, provisions for months of travel. The kind of ship a well-funded husband and father might purchase to ensure his family's mobility.

Harper urged Tyr aboard the ship and guided him to the command center.

"Where did you steal *this*, Harper?"

"I didn't steal it, Tyr. You bought it. You're filthy rich. Hah, gotcha. Well, it's true. See, the whole interdimensional project, all the R&D, it's already led to...I think it was three hundred twenty some-odd hardware, software, and process patents last time I looked. As the principals, Hühne and I own a third of that, and you own a third of my piece of the action. At the rate we've been going, we could buy the Andromeda someday. This ship made a dent in your account, but it certainly didn't wipe it out. Now get ready to jet. You have business to take care of on Midden."

Tyr wondered why Harper had given *him* a piece of the action, and why the uncouth little man wasn't off somewhere wallowing in his wealth. But that was moot, given the bomb Harper had just dropped. He grabbed for the engineer's neck, but Harper anticipated him and ducked.

"Stop it, Tyr. I said we have to get to Midden and I meant it. I've been helping cover your absence for nearly four years now, and it's been getting freakin' difficult, lemme tell you. You've got to get that witch Olma under control. I mean, I honestly don't think she's turning Tamerlane into the twisted little Orca she wants. But he's still young enough to be impressionable. And she puts Yvaine and Breyon through absolute hell. Now hang on, 'cuz we're shedding this rock."

Without waiting for Tyr to get settled, Harper juiced up and started to thread the hanger egress tunnel. The outer airlock iris barely had time to get out of his way as he gunned the ship into space and headed for the nearest nexus point.

Tyr was decidedly concerned about Harper's being privy even to Tamerlane's existence – how the blazes did he even know? – never mind somehow involved in the child's life. But the most important thing now was to gain information. He grudgingly apologized for his knee-jerk reaction and offered to begin piloting through

slipstream while Harper filled him in on the years he'd missed. The garrulous Harper was glad to comply. Things had certainly changed since the Derevo invasion, and Harper enjoyed knowing more than Tyr. For his part, Tyr maintained focus, paid close attention, and soon garnered the information he wanted as he guided the ship towards his son's haven.

It turned out that, in his off-the-flexi R&D, Harper had run across a clue to Tamerlane's existence. He surreptitiously tracked it down in his spare time, then secretly contacted Yvaine, who helped him convince Olma that he was coming to them as Tyr's factotum, to help them enhance their situation and prepare for Tyr's eventual return.

In his father's absence, Tamerlane had become a strong and intelligent Nietzschean boy who seemed older than his years. There he was, according to Harper, still living in hiding on Midden. Child of two obliterated Prides. Being raised by Olma to take on all the baggage of the near-psychosis the Nietzschean race still manifested three centuries after the battle at Witchhead. Even the way she officiously gave him the steel blade after his First Sabra-Tino, as if the absence of his father's hand on that meaningful gift was irrelevant, barely worthy of notice. Immersed in the culture where Norms had become kludges and mutts and mules, to be used and abused. And still, Tamerlane walked his own path.

Tyr let Harper's evaluation of his people pass. Perhaps the engineer even had a point. He certainly had *something* new about him.

Harper shared observations Yvaine had passed on to him. Apparently Tamerlane, even as young as he was, never displayed the need to bridle at and accept every challenge. As if he was so sure of his own superior nature that the gambits of others were beneath his notice. The boy delved into all the history he could find on engineer Paul Museveni and nanotechnist Styrka Kraft, and their newlywed migration from the Ceres asteroid in Earth's solar system to found the Ayn Rand Station colony because they felt people in their home system had become too soft. Tamerlane also absorbed everything available by and about Drago Museveni and his wives, especially Athena Kasov, whose leadership led to the alliance of the Drago and Kasov Prides after they'd splintered off from the original Museveni Pride. And he ferreted out every iota of data he could lay hands on about his own father, as well as pestering Olma for stories about his mother.

Yvaine had also told Harper that, since the day Tyr delivered Tamerlane and Olma into her care, the boy had interacted easily with her and her stepson, Breyon Laurensen. On his fifth birthday, he'd voiced admiration for Yvaine's quiet inner strength and Breyon's maturing aspirations and demanded Olma treat them with respect. Yvaine had added that Tamerlane never used and, she honestly felt, never even *thought* the word kludge.

Within a week, despite having to avoid detection by unfriendly ships at a few nexus points, Tyr and Harper reached Midden. As they came to a covert landing on an untamed hillside, Tyr's anticipation warred with trepidation. His son would recognize him, of course, but would Tamerlane accept him? Had the boy felt alone, abandoned, forsaken, unloved? How badly had Olma bent the branch entrusted to her? Despite Harper's report, Tyr wondered if his son had been raised to hate, deceive, and plot to kill him.

Exiting the ship, he saw three fair-skinned adults and a darker child approaching. They'd recognized the slipranger from Harper's previous visit, but hadn't been expecting it. Wanting to neither raise questionable hopes nor jinx his efforts, Harper hadn't told them of the retrieval attempt; and Tyr had elected not to contact them en route. Yvaine was the first to react; uttering a small cry and stopping in her tracks. As Breyon realized what had startled his stepmother, he also stopped, then returned to her side to urge her forward. Olma's only reaction was a momentary grimace, which she quickly suppressed. She stayed a few steps behind Tamerlane.

Tyr stood watching his son walk towards him. Tamerlane had his father coloring, and would surely grow to

similar height. His lean, wiry build was his mother's legacy. Sure-footed, he glided across the rough ground with barely a sound. He was simply dressed, armed with a single boot knife, and his shoulder-length dreadlocks were well kempt. When about five meters away, the solemn boy suddenly grinned, whooped, and ran into his father's arms. The look of amazement and unmitigated joy on Tyr's face, the words "Center of the Wheel" delivered in a choked whisper, the swift stoop to enfold his son in a bear hug, brought a tear to Harper's eye.

"Father! I knew you'd come! Olma said you wouldn't, said both my parents were dead. But I knew it wasn't true. And here you are!"

"Here I am, Tamerlane. And here you are. Look at you. What a young lion you've become. I've much to tell you. And much to hear from you."

Tyr stood and briefly greeted Olma, Yvaine, and Breyon, now standing nearby.

"My gratitude to you all that my son is safe and well. I can't stay for long, but we all have much to talk about. Information to share. Futures to discuss. Plans to make. This child's continued safety and wellbeing to ensure." He turned to Tamerlane again, and gave him the heartstrong salute – fist to chest, then open, palm-up hand flung out toward the boy – he had once offered Yvaine. "My son, will you invite me into your home?"

"Your home, too, father. Always."

Tamerlane took his father's hand and led him to the small, unassuming house set amidst a cluster of terraforming pines and dwarf redwoods. Tyr and Harper remained there four days, catching up on the years and conversing with the small household about the future. Tyr and Tamerlane also spent many hours alone together, hiking through the forest, hunting small game, sharing secrets and plans. Finally, pleading the need to start putting certain plans into action, Tyr bid his son a brief farewell. His lack of emotional affect fooled no one.

After leaving Midden to set into motion some of Tyr's still mysterious plans, Harper talked about his anger against Dylan, and what the years had been like since leaving the Andromeda. He also brought Tyr up to date on their other shipmates.

Dylan was still, Tyr gathered, flying around recruiting additional crew, promoting his Commonwealth, and trying to save the cockroaches. Trance remained with him, as of course did the Rommie avatar. Rev Bem had worked out his spiritual angst, achieved a new balance between his Magog nature and Wayist path, and returned to the Andromeda. Beka, on the other hand, had left. The years since her return had led her away from Dylan and into the administrative structure of the new Commonwealth. Realizing where Dylan and the old Commonwealth had gone wrong, she was dedicated to avoiding repetition of and to correcting the mistakes of the past. Her rise through the echelons of the Commonwealth polity was proceeding in a straightforward, decisive, and meteoric manner. Tyr realized she finally knew who, and how self-sufficient, she really was...a process he'd seen start during their mutual tenure with Dylan.

Harper had one more bit of news to impart.

"Speaking of the Commonwealth, this'll interest you. The Magog worldship's no longer approaching. It's not retreating, and swarmships continue to attack where they can; but the worldship itself has stopped dead in space. It's like some big, fast-paced plan of the Abyss got aborted somehow and it's reverted to a holding action. Poret...you don't know her; she's H hne's bondmate now and one hot intuitist, plus she's a knotted nurturer. Anyway, even Poret can't figure out for sure what that's all about. She's had an inkling it may be partly because of H^2 . Our new ability to exercise some control over interdimensional tunneling. But she can't get a real grip on it."

"H two?"

"Oh, yeah, ain't that a chuckle? That's what people started calling us, me and H hne, our team. H^2 .

Y'know, like H squared? We've become pretty famous among the top scientific echelons of the Perseids *and* the Commonwealth."

That, Tyr could believe. Gone for only a year in personal time, Tyr had expected to find the same old Harper when he returned. But the sevenfold passage of time here, his dedicated efforts at the frontiers of science, his confidence in the value of what he'd been doing, the respect he'd garnered, all had obviously contributed to Harper's maturing. He was still brash and enthusiastic, given to off-the-flexi impulses, appreciative of beautiful women of all species. And still funny enough, Tyr had to admit, to make a certain dour Nietzschean laugh inside. But Harper no longer seemed so hopelessly desperate for attention, especially female attention. He carried himself with a certain dignity and seemed to have a new-found grasp on what ultimately makes a man a man. And man he was. Still Norm, still little, still annoying, but definitely a man. One Tyr was glad to keep by his side as he pursued his personal agenda.